STREET & SMITH'S

WILD WEST WEEKLY

NOV. 28, 1936

10¢

ALL STORIES COMPLETE

BUZZARDS FER THANKSGIVIN'
A
"CIRCLE J"
NOVELETTE
By CLEVE ENDICOTT

ALSO
SONNY TABOR
AND
TEXAS TRIGGERS
NOVELETTES

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Both for $29.75

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4 Genuine Diamonds

LJ-6 . . . Perfectly matched "Queen of Hearts" engagement and wedding ring ensemble of 14K Solid White or Yellow Gold. Engagement ring is set with a fiery, genuine blue-white diamond, and the wedding ring with 3 matched diamonds. Specify gold desired. **Both for only $2.87 a month.**

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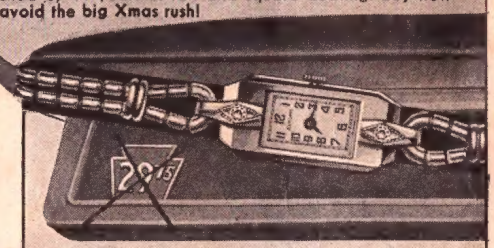
LJ-6A . . . Engagement Ring only . . . $19.75
LJ-6B . . . Wedding Ring only $12.50

$1.00 Down — Balance 10% Monthly



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Only $19.75

LJ-9 . . . One of America's smartest Baguette wrist watches at an especially low price. Elegantly styled, modern lifetime case set with 2 genuine diamonds; fully guaranteed movement. Smart link bracelet to match. **Reduced to $19.75 — only $1.87 a month.**

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Latest 17 Jewel BULOVA

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Ladies' 7 Diamond CLUSTER RING

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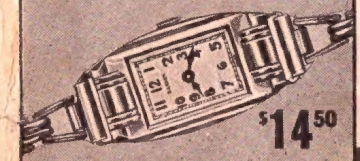
LJ-2 . . . Dazzling ladies' square prong cluster ring, expertly set with seven finely matched fiery, genuine diamonds. Looks like a $450.00 solitaire. 14K Solid Yellow Gold ring. **Only $2.65 a month.**



$14.50

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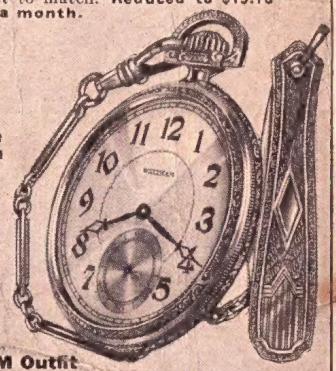
LJ-4 . . . Ladies, baguette type wrist watch in streamlined permanent waite case; fully guaranteed movement. Matched bracelet. **Only $1.35 a month.**



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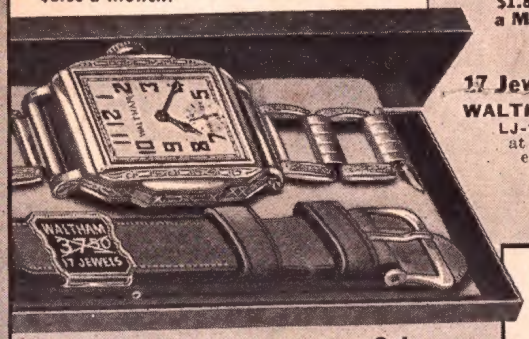

17 Jewel WALTHAM Outfit

LJ-10 . . . Nationally famous WALTHAM at an amazingly low price! Handsomely engraved 12 size white lifetime case; factory guaranteed, accurate and dependable 17 Jewel WALTHAM movement; complete with engraved knife and chain to match. **All for $19.75 — only $1.87 a month.**

$1.59 a month

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LJ-7 . . . Gentleman's initial ring, very attractively priced. 10K Solid Yellow Gold, set with a brilliant, genuine diamond and 2 Solid White Gold Initials on contrasting, genuine black Onyx. (Specify initials desired.) **Only $1.59 a month.**

17 Jewel WALTHAM "Diplomat"

Extra Leather Strap FREE!

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LJ-8 . . . Imagine this for only $2.37 a month! Guaranteed 17 Jewel WALTHAM "Diplomat" at a remarkably low price! Richly engraved, permanent white case with link bracelet to match and an extra, genuine leather strap. Usually $37.50 — now **only $24.75. $2.37 a month.**

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One *today* upon another *today*—how quickly a decade is built! Youth approaches manhood in high heart, embraces maturity as the period of his conquest, then "remembers with a sigh the days that are no more."

So life goes—like that. NOW is the only opportunity. NOW is the moment of success. NOW men decide—NOW men win or fail.

Are you one of the men who are wondering today what will happen to them tomorrow? Then remember this: *If you take care of today, tomorrow will take care of itself.* And one of the most important safeguards you can take is to be certain your *training* is modern . . . that you are adequately equipped to master the problems of 1937. Today, in almost every line of human endeavor, ambitious men are modernizing their training by spare-time study of International Correspondence Schools Courses. Their action is a guide to you — and NOW is the time to act! Complete information on any subject in which you are interested will be sent without cost or obligation. The coupon is for your convenience. Return it today.

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STREET & SMITH'S WILD WEST WEEKLY

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Vol. 106, No. 6 CONTENTS FOR NOVEMBER 28, 1936 Whole No. 1780

Cover Picture—Scene from "Buzzards Fer Thanksgivin'" . . *Painted by R. G. Harris*

THREE COMPLETE WESTERN NOVELETTES

Buzzards Fer Thanksgivin' . . . *Cleve Endicott* . . . 10
An' Circle J dishes out bullets fer said buzzards.

Sonny Tabor At Broken Gun Ranch . *Ward M. Stevens* . . . 61
Plenty of unbroken guns is waitin' there fer the outlaw.

Texas Triggers Sling Lead . . . *Walker Tompkins* . . 100
The which makes it plenty unhealthy fer owl-hooters.

FOUR COMPLETE WESTERN STORIES

Double Cross at the Double Crescent . *George C. Henderson* . . 37
It's dangerous ter try framin' a gun-wise ranny.

Mix-up In Mescalero . . . . *Allan R. Bosworth* . . 49
Shorty Masters an' the Sonora Kid untangle things with lead.

Dynamite And Water . . . . *Claude Rister* . . . 83
Them two—an' nerve—are plumb powerful weapons in a range war.

Dogie Cantwell's Thanksgiving 96
A story in pictures an' text.

BRIEF WESTERN FACT STORIES

The Bandits Returned The Cattle . 60
What The Campers Escaped . . 82
Indians Avenged 95
A Fight with a Panther . . . 122

DEPARTMENTS

Fiddlin' Joe's Song Corral 123
The Wranglers Corner 125

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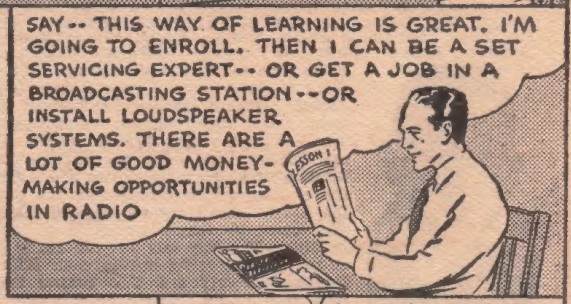
HOW A FREE LESSON STARTED BILL ON THE WAY TO A GOOD RADIO JOB

I HAVEN'T HAD A RAISE IN YEARS -- GUESS I NEVER WILL -- I'M READY TO GIVE UP
BUCK UP, BILL, WHY NOT TRY AN INDUSTRY THAT'S GROWING -- WHERE THERE'S MORE OPPORTUNITY

MARY'S RIGHT -- I'M NOT GETTING ANYWHERE. I OUGHT TO TRY A NEW FIELD TO MAKE MORE MONEY
LOOK AT THIS - RADIO IS CERTAINLY GROWING FAST -- AND THE NATIONAL RADIO INSTITUTE SAYS THEY TRAIN MEN FOR RADIO RIGHT AT HOME IN SPARE TIME
I DON'T THINK I COULD LEARN RADIO THAT WAY -- BUT THEY'LL SEND ME A SAMPLE LESSON FREE. GUESS I'LL MAIL THE COUPON AND LOOK INTO THIS

J. E. SMITH, President
National Radio Institute

Yes, I will send my First Lesson FREE to show how easy it is to TRAIN AT HOME FOR A GOOD RADIO JOB


SAY -- THIS WAY OF LEARNING IS GREAT. I'M GOING TO ENROLL. THEN I CAN BE A SET SERVICING EXPERT -- OR GET A JOB IN A BROADCASTING STATION -- OR INSTALL LOUDSPEAKER SYSTEMS. THERE ARE A LOT OF GOOD MONEY-MAKING OPPORTUNITIES IN RADIO
LESSON 1

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Radio broadcasting stations employ engineers, operators, station managers and pay up to $5,000 a year. Spare time Radio set servicing pays as much as $200 to $500 a year. Full time Radio servicing jobs pay as much as $30, $50, $75 a week. Many Radio Experts own and operate their own full time or part time Radio sales and service businesses. Radio manufacturers and jobbers employ testers, inspectors, foremen, engineers, servicemen, paying up to $6,000 a year. Radio operators on ships get good pay and see the world besides. Automobile, police, aviation, commercial Radio, and loud speaker systems offer good opportunities now and for the future. Television promises many good jobs soon. Men I have trained are holding good jobs in all these branches of Radio.

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J. E. SMITH, President
National Radio Institute, Dept. 6MD
Washington, D. C.

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Dept. 6MD, Washington, D. C.

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Acid In Your Blood Kills Health and Pep Kidneys Often to Blame

There is nothing that can so quickly undermine your health, strength, and energy as an excess of Acid in your blood. Every time you move your hand, take a step, or use even the slightest amount of energy, cells are broken down in the body and create Acids. This process goes on even when you are asleep.

Fortunately, nature has provided an automatic method of getting rid of these excess Acids. To get rid of these Acids nature provides that your blood circulate 200 times an hour through 9 million tiny, delicate tubes, or filters, in your Kidneys. It is the function of the Kidneys to filter out these health-destroying Acids, and to purify the blood so that it can take energy and vitality to every part of your body. But if your Kidneys slow down and do not function properly, and remove approximately 3 pints of Acids, Poisons, and liquids from your blood every 24 hours, then there is a gradual accumulation of these Acids and Wastes, and slowly but surely your system becomes poisoned, making you feel old before your time, run-down, and worn-out.

Causes Many Ills

If poorly functioning Kidneys cause you to suffer from Acidity, Getting Up Nights, Nervousness, Leg Pains, Dizziness, Frequent Headaches, Rheumatic Pains, Swollen Joints, Circles Under Eyes, Backache, Loss of Vitality, or Burning, Itching and Smarting, don't waste time worrying and waiting. The natural thing to do is to help your Kidneys with the doctor's special, guaranteed Kidney diuretic prescription, called Cystex, (pronounced Siss-Tex). Cystex works directly on the Kidneys and Bladder, and helps the Kidneys in their function of washing impurities and Acids from the system and in maintaining the purity of the blood. Don't try to overcome Acidity in your blood by taking medicines to offset the Acidity. The only way you can really get rid of the Acidity is by helping your Kidneys to function properly and thus remove the Acid from your system. The Acid is bound to stay there unless the Kidneys function properly.

Dr. T. J. Rastelli

Thousands of druggists and doctors in over 22 different countries throughout the world recommend Cystex for its purity and prompt action as a Kidney diuretic. For instance, Dr. T. J. Rastelli, famous Doctor, Surgeon, and Scientist, of London, says: "Cystex is one of the finest remedies I have ever known in my medical practice. Any doctor will recommend it for its definite benefit in the treatment of many functional Kidney and Bladder disorders. It is safe and harmless." Dr. C. Z. Rendelle, another widely known physician and Medical Examiner, of San Francisco, recently said: "Since the Kidneys purify the blood, the Poisons collect in these organs and must be promptly flushed from the system, otherwise they reenter the blood stream and create a toxic condition. I can truthfully recommend the use of Cystex."

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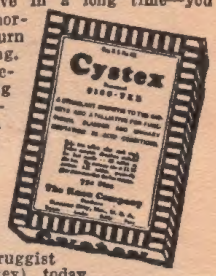

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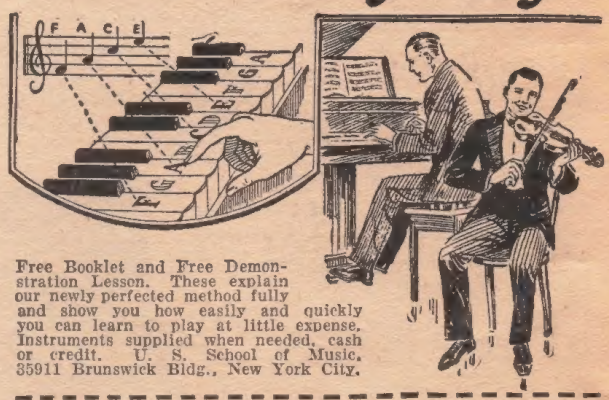

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INVENTOR

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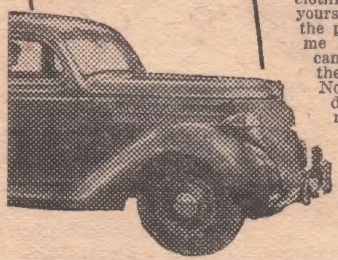

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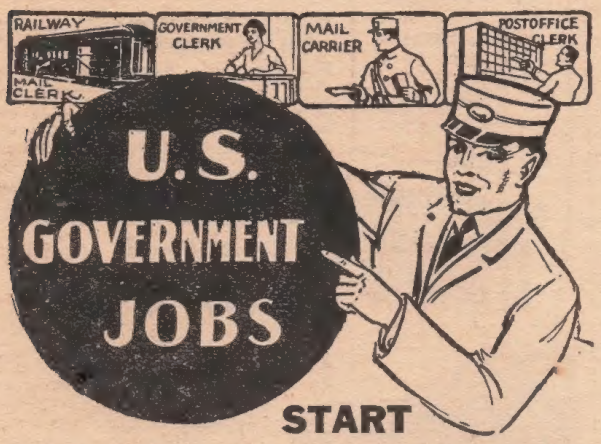

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Buzzards Fer Thanksgivin'

A "Circle J" Novelette

By Cleve Endicott

Author of "The Broken Spur," etc.

CHAPTER I.

THE FATAL SHOT.

WHEELS rattled behind the bend in Red Arrow Gulch, and "Moon" Murfree tensed. He turned to the four hombres who crouched behind him.

"All right, gents," he growled. "Hyar comes our poker an' whisky mazuma fer the cold, cruel winter."

One of Moon's four pards, a bald-headed jasper, said derisively: "Yuh won't catch me freezin' in Montana. I'm headed fer the Rio on my share o' the loot."

Another saddle tramp, a runt, sneered: "Shoot first an' brag after."

Moon Murfree glared at them. "Yuh keep careful fingers on them triggers!" he snapped. "Shootin' is

a hangin' crime. Holdups is soon forgot."

Then Moon lifted a green neckerchief over his protruding chin to cover his grim mouth and squashed nose. He pulled his tan Stetson down close to his glittering black eyes. The .45 in his right hand clicked to full cock, and he sank behind the big pine tree that had been felled across the Twin Rivers road.

Stage robbery was nothing new in Moon Murfree's life. There were a dozen rewards out for him in States other than Montana. But he felt jittery about this job. It was because he needed three thousand dollars real pronto. His life was in danger if he didn't get it.

Not a week ago, Moon's old owl-hoot gang had turned up in the neighborhood. They found him working a broken-down ranch with the four saddle tramps who now were with him on the Twin Rivers road.

Moon's new ranch was nothing but a blind for rustling Bitterroot cattle, but he wasn't doing so well. Despite that, the owl-hoot gang demanded that he pay up an old poker debt to them or take what was coming to him.

Now, as Moon lay in wait for the stage that was bringing Thanksgiving pay rolls to Twin Rivers, he cast a nervous eye upon his four rustler aids. They were rank amateurs compared with his former pards. They couldn't be trusted to work swiftly and make a get-away. He almost wished that he was tackling the holdup alone, but it was too late to change now.

Moon heard the approaching wheels at the bend of the gulch. There was the creak of a singletree, the thudding of hoofs. It sounded like one team. There should have been two spans of horses pulling the stage. Moon waited nervously for the driver to see the pine barricade and yell.

Then, Moon reared up from behind the fallen tree. The scream of brakes reached his ears. His eyes bulged. He watched a buckboard, not a stage, skid to a halt behind

a team of rearing broncs. And the driver was a small, yellow-faced Chinaman, who cried out excitedly to his horses:

"No smashee Circle J holiday glub! Stlop hoss! Whoa-ee-ee!"

Moon Murfree leaped through the branches of the pine toward the buckboard.

"Great guns!" he was exclaiming. "It's that fool cook from the Circle J outfit! Grab air! I'll blow the daylights out o' yuh!"

Behind Moon, the four saddle tramps leaped to the attack like hungry wolves. For a second, the Chinese cook stared at them in terrified astonishment. Moon sprang up the front wheel of the buckboard, while his men grabbed at the bridles of the bucking team.

It was then that the cook called Sing Lo caught his wits. Before Moon could grab him, the Chinaman whirled over the back of the driver's seat.

"Don't kill him!" Moon shouted. "Stop, yuh fool! I'll slaughter yuh."

The Circle J cook ducked among the boxes of supplies that were slated for his ranch's Thanksgiving feast. Moon leaped after him. But the Chinaman was as quick as a fox. He jumped over the tailboard of the wagon, and darted toward the brush beside the road.

The cook was faster than Moon, but didn't see another rustler racing to cut him off. That second hombre dived headlong at the escaping Chinaman, caught him around the waist, and flung him to the road.

"Chinee velly good homblay!" Sing Lo yelled, trying to squirm loose from his captor. "He have no money. He no try get away."

Moon Murfree fell on the prisoner heavily.

"Git some rope," the rustler boss shouted. "Hurry up! That stage will be along any minute."

"Let me smash his skull in!" cried Moon's bald-headed partner.

"No hurt Chinee!" the Circle J cook yowled, struggling.

Moon Murfree was hog-tying the Chinaman with a vengeance.

"Let me have him!" the rustler ordered his four lieutenants. "There ain't no use in killin' him. That Circle J outfit is tough. They'll track us down in no time at all fer murder. Robbery is a different matter. Hyar yuh are—throw the chink in the buckboard. Now git the rig out o' hyar."

Moon was lifting the prisoner bodily from the road when suddenly he halted with the wriggling Sing Lo in his arms. The rustler's ears caught the rattling of stage wheels. It was plain that the vehicle had approached close during the struggle. None of his men had heard it.

Moon whirled in time to see the noses of the first stage team come into view around the bend of the gulch. He dropped the Chinaman, stabbing for a holstered six-gun.

Before he got the weapon out, the second stage team was in view. Moon saw the driver and the guard rising from their seats. The guard threw a shotgun to his shoulder.

"Look out!" the rustler cried to his four henchmen, and he ducked low to the road, shielded by the bound Chinaman.

Crash! The stage driver's shotgun blasted buckshot at the other bandits, and two of them screamed in agony.

Moon wasted no time. He triggered with a speed for which he had been famous when a member of the old owl-hoot gang. His six-gun spat twice in quick succession, driving hot lead into the chest of the stage guard.

He didn't have to kill the driver. He heard the weapons of his two surviving aids roar, and saw the driver topple from the seat, following the body of the guard to the road.

It was murder, something that Moon Murfree had wished to avoid, but now there was no helping it.

With a snarling charge, Moon sped past the bucking teams to the door of the coach and jerked it open. His smoking weapon covered the inside. It was empty of passengers, but an iron box lay on the floor. Moon shot the lock off, then lifted the box to the outside. Opening the lid, his eyes feasted on stacks of greenbacks for a few seconds.

Behind him, the bald-headed rustler and the pock-marked runt whistled in appreciation of the haul.

Moon turned on them, black eyes glittering.

"Now, we've done it!" he snarled. "Two of our bunch are daid, we've beefed the driver an' the guard—an' that chink saw us do it!"

"We kin jest as easily put a slug in *him*," the snaggle-toothed baldhead said, turning toward the bound Chinaman.

"Not yet," Moon Murfree snapped with authority. "That cook might come in handy. If we git in a jam, we might trade him fer our liberty. Thar's a lot o' grub in his buckboard. We're going to hit fer a mountain hide-out, boys. It ain't safe fer us around hyar. Throw the bodies in the rig afore anybody else comes along this road."

"Baldy" made a wry face. "Yuh don't aim ter take the buckboard, do yuh?"

"It's got enough grub ter last us fer months," Moon snarled. "I'm runnin' this show, Baldy. Yuh obey orders. We'll tool that buckboard right across the prairie just outside these foothills. We'll use the team fer pack animals when we git ter the right spot o' mountain. That's the fastest an' the safest way. Git ter work."

"An' the chink comes with us alive an' kickin'?" Baldy questioned.

Bound hand and foot, Sing Lo was sitting up in the road.

"Chinee velly good cook," the little slant-eyed fellow yelled. "He make veddy good hand flor Mistlee Murflee."

"Yuh see, he knows yuh, Moon," the runted rustler chuckled.

"Shut up an' git that buckboard turned around," Moon said angrily. "I'm goin' ter blot out all traces o' this killin'. We're in a bad hole."

It was the Circle J outfit that Moon feared more than the Twin Rivers sheriff. In his one year of experience in the Bitterroots, he had carefully avoided that spread, confining his rustling to smaller outfits.

That was the reason he had not done so well. His saddle-tramp pards had taunted him for his fear of the Circle J boss, but Moon Murfree was no fool.

Moon had seen Billy West of Circle J in action with fists and a gun. He knew that the young rancher's men always stuck together and would go through fire and brimstone for one another. Moon didn't mean to bring that outfit after him, if he could help it. And what was more, he wasn't going to let his two surviving saddle-tramp aids do it.

As Moon set to work cleaning up the evidences of a gun fight on the road, he was already planning on getting rid of Baldy and the other tramp. He'd let them help him drive the buckboard to a safe hiding place, then his gun would speak twice.

There was a lot of money in that

iron box. They were not going to share it. Half of it must go to Moon's old outlaw friends in Twin Rivers; the rest would be his. He might join the old gang again.

And as for Sing Lo, the Circle J Chinaman, Moon hadn't yet made up his mind.

CHAPTER II.

GUN HAWKS.

AT the time of the killings on the Twin Rivers road, there were big doings in the cow town. It was the day before Thanksgiving. The local stores had chipped in to give their customers a turkey shoot.

By noon, a score of waddies and ranchers had gathered beside the post office, where a twenty-pound bird was gobbling in a crate on the veranda. Hombre after hombre was trying his luck to win a feast for his ranch outfit, and the town was trembling with the roar of six-guns.

A mile away, as the Circle J outfit rode toward Twin Rivers to take part in the contest, Billy West and his hands heard the echo of those shots. They were also planning to meet their chink cook in town. Sing Lo had been sent to the county seat, some distance away, to get a buckboard load of the best victuals that he could lay hands upon.

Billy's punchers had been talking on their way to Twin Rivers about how many pumpkin pies and quarts of cranberry sauce they could eat.

One of them, a walrus-mustached gent by the name of "Buck" Foster, was making brags about his six-gun prowess.

"Yuh don't have ter worry about our turkey, pards," Buck said loftily. "I'm goin' ter capture that twenty-pounder with the best case o' shootin' that yuh ever saw."

Beside Buck rode a young red-headed waddy who never missed an opportunity to annoy the veteran.

"Do yuh mean shootin' off yore mouth, Buck?" Joe Scott asked. "Yuh shore can beat anybody at that."

The walrus-mustached Buck stiffened in the saddle. He was always quick to resent the slightest gibe. If Joe had been anybody else, Buck would have roared for fight. He had a poorly mended broken nose and a bullet-lopped ear to show for some of the scraps into which his fiery temper had plunged him. But the leathery veteran treated Joe's remarks with utter scorn.

"So yuh think *yuh* might stand a chance, do yuh?" Buck snapped irately. "Look hyar, yuh spavined, claw-handled son of a red centipede, yuh keep out o' that thar contest! We drawed straws at Circle J ter see who would do our shootin' fer us. I won the draw." His shaggy eyebrows wriggled at the other rider. "Ain't that so, Billy?"

The young Circle J boss was riding with a frown on his tanned forehead. He seemed a bit out of sorts with the world, despite the approach of the happy holiday.

Usually carefree and ready for fun, Billy was well-liked in the Twin Rivers section. There was nothing of the "Handsome Harry" about him, but he was clean-cut, square-jawed, with cool gray eyes. His husky shoulders and slim hips told that he worked hard for a living, instead of taking life as it came.

"Am I goin' to have to listen to you two rannihans insult each other all day?" Billy West asked mournfully. "We're gettin' into town, so pipe down. Folks will be puttin' us in the same class as that tough gang that we heard was in Twin Rivers."

The red-headed, freckled Joe

Scott traded withering glances with the veteran Buck.

"Is that what's worryin' yuh, Billy?" Joe asked.

"We ain't got nothin' ter worry about from them," Buck Foster interrupted hastily. "As soon as they see my trigger work, they'll vamose like coyotes." He rose in the stirrups. "Look!" he yipped, pointing a gnarled finger down the ramshackle main street of Twin Rivers. "Thar's the turkey shoot. It's goin' full blast. Scratch gravel, gents!"

Buck dug in his spurs, and his buckskin leaped away from Billy's and Joe's broncs. They let him go, watching his old hat brim flopping in the breeze, and his bearskin vest ruffling.

It was true that they had drawn straws at Circle J to determine who would shoot for their crowd. Buck had won. It was no indication that they would get the turkey, for Buck was not as good a marksman as he thought. There were plenty of fine shots in the Bitterroots. But the Circle J outfit decided to let just one of their number shoot for all of them, and that hombre would be Buck.

"Billy, I hate ter say it," Joe Scott remarked sourly, "but I got a hunch that we're goin' ter have ter hunt wild turkey ter-night fer our dinner. An' I shore would like a slice o' the white meat o' that twenty-pound gobbler in front of the post office."

"Well, if Buck pulls a boner," Billy replied, forcing a grin, "don't rub it in. He'll feel bad enough about it." He eyed the crowd in the alley that ran between the post office and a general store next door. "Steer clear of that tough gang in town. Let Sheriff Hawks handle 'em. They might be a trail outfit like they said they were. Or they might not. I see some of 'em now."

As the Circle J boss kneed his chestnut bronc forward, the animal began to dance nervously. Powder was exploding once more in the alley beside the post office, where a shooting gallery had been made for the contestants for the turkey.

Billy's bronc was used to gunfire from the saddle, but the horse did not like crowds, and it shied away. The rancher leaned forward to pat its neck as he turned it to the hitch rail, where he swung down to earth, letting his reins dangle. The bronc was trained to stand, and had never failed him yet.

Billy dusted off his batwing chaps with a gauntlet, took a notch in his low-sung gun belt, and tilted back his gray beaverskin hat after the manner of a range hand in town for a good time. With Joe beside him, the Circle J boss jingled toward the crowd. He could hear Buck Foster's loud voice telling the citizens of Twin Rivers that he was about to win the turkey.

"This is as easy as sleepin' in a haystack," the veteran said. "If I don't put all six bullets plumb through that bull's-eye, I'm a sheep-herdin' Chinaman."

There was a hearty laugh from the good-natured crowd, who were used to Buck—so used to him that they never kidded him at the wrong time. But now Billy West heard a stranger question Buck's ability.

The Circle J boss saw the stranger who spoke, and Billy didn't like the looks of him. The fellow was tall and expensively dressed in red silk shirt and calfskin chaps. What was more, he was sporting two pearl-handled guns in greased holsters.

He was young, but hard living had sharpened his features and drawn his eyes to slits. He was the leader of the outlaw gang with which Moon

Murfree used to ride, although Billy West had no way of knowing that.

"I've got five dollars ter say yuh don't even put three slugs in the bull's-eye, cowboy," the stranger called to Buck Foster. "What's more, I'll bet twenty more dollars ter another five that yuh don't win the turkey."

Billy saw Buck Foster turn angrily and glower at the copper-hued speaker.

"Who do yuh think yuh are?" the veteran demanded. "Yuh can't git away with no loco bets like that. Put up yore money or button yore lip."

Billy edged forward quickly, for the tall, fancy-dressed hombre had started at Buck's tart tone. Before the Circle J boss could reach them, the stranger grinned coldly, dug into his pocket, and extracted a roll of bills.

"Nobody tells Salty Conway ter button his lip," the stranger said slowly, "unless he means it. I'm forgivin' yuh, cowboy, on account of our bet. Shoot, an' stop showin' off."

"Waal, I'll be a horned toad!" Buck Foster exclaimed. "Who do yuh think yo're talkin' ter?"

Billy was just in time to force himself between his veteran pard and the hombre who called himself "Salty" Conway. There was no doubt in the mind of the Circle J boss that the fancy-dressed hombre was one of the hard-case hombres who had drifted into town a week ago.

Out of the corner of an eye, Billy could see several tough-looking strangers edging up to surround the fuming Buck Foster. And the Circle J boss realized that trouble was going to pop unless he stopped it.

"Just a second, pard," Billy West said to the veteran, catching him by the arm. "Are you goin' to shoot for our outfit, or do we have to draw straws ag'in? If you don't start, let Joe try."

At the mention of the redhead's name, Buck Foster gulped, and cast a quick look at the freckled, big-eared Joe Scott.

"I'm doin' the shootin'," the veteran replied hastily, "but this hyar hombre was saying somethin' about me not——"

"Forget it," Billy advised. "You're bad at bets with money. Call it off."

"I ain't callin' nothin' off!" Buck exclaimed, digging into his pocket for a ten-dollar bill that had just been paid him on account until he received his wages from the money being brought by the stage. "Hyar's my stake." He waved the greenback at Salty Conway. "I'm showin' yuh a thing or two."

Billy watched Conway take the money and hand it to one of his tough friends, who held it, smirking. Buck wheeled to the rope stretched across the entrance to the alley. The veteran tried to make a quick draw, but he was so upset that it wasn't so speedy, and Billy heard Salty Conway chuckle. At that, Buck trembled with indignation.

"Easy now," Billy soothed the veteran.

"I'm takin' it easy," Buck growled, squinting a right eye over the sights of his six-gun.

Salty Conway blew his nose loudly.

Buck jerked an angry face around. "Will yuh keep quiet?" he demanded. "This ain't no horn-tootin' match."

Billy eyed Salty Conway coldly. "Give Buck a chance, stranger," he said tonelessly.

The fancy-dressed stranger stared back at the Circle J boss, a sneer on his lips.

In the meantime, Buck was lining his gun sights again down the alley at a box of sand upon which was nailed a target.

Crash! Buck's gun roared.

"Missed the bull's eye!" one of Salty Conway's men yipped.

"Shut up!" Buck cried, and he fired again.

"Another miss!"

Buck was trembling with rage, badly rattled. Billy spoke to him quietly to take his time.

For the third try, the veteran triggered, and he hit the bull's-eye. Again and again, his weapon spoke, with the same success. He was cocking the smoking six-gun for the last shot when some hombre snickered in the crowd. Buck fired, missing the target, and he let out a howl.

"I'm shootin' ag'in!" he cried. "I kin hit that bull's-eye every time."

Salty Conway wormed to the rope, drawing two weapons.

"Yuh put three slugs in the target; so yuh won five bucks, but I'm coppin' the turkey, so yuh lose five," the stranger growled. "That makes us even. Yuh don't shoot no more; so stop squawkin'."

Billy grabbed Buck. "Give that hombre his chance," the Circle J boss ordered. "Every man who wants to shoot can do it. Buck, you're makin' a fool of yoreself."

"I don't care two hoots what I'm makin' o' myself!" the veteran replied hotly. "I won't take no guff from that dude."

Crash! Salty Conway's right-hand gun roared.

Buck and Billy turned to see a direct hit on the target. Then the stranger's left-hand weapon blasted, with the same result. Salty Conway was grinning wickedly as he pumped four more slugs through the bull's-eye of the target, making a perfect score. It was excellent marksmanship, and it drew a cheer from the crowd.

"There goes our Thanksgivin' turkey," Joe Scott groaned. "Billy, you've got to take a chance. We were loco to let Buck uphold our reputation."

"I'm shootin' ag'in, I tell yuh!" Buck yelled.

Billy had half turned, his head thrown up. "Listen!" he warned, for there was a commotion at the outside of the crowd.

Others about him had heard voices calling down the plank sidewalk, and presently Billy made out the words being shouted. "Stage robbery!" He felt his nerves tingle and whirled to Joe and Buck, who were listening intently. The cry was caught up, and swiftly the crowd was shouting:

"The stage was robbed!"

Billy grabbed his pards. "Come on!" he barked, and started through the punchers gathered in the head of the alley.

Now, beyond the hats of other men, he could see Sheriff Jim Hawks racing out of the calaboose across the road. At the hitch rails up and down the main street, riders were untying their broncs. There was no need for the lawman to call for a posse. The town was ready to go at the drop of a chip.

"Our pay roll was on that stage along with five others," Joe Scott said as Billy began running toward the jail.

The Circle J boss saw a man talking excitedly to the gray-haired sheriff, and as Billy came up with a dozen other waddies, he heard the lawman say:

"Yuh found the stage blocked by a pine on the road, an' the driver

an' guard were gone? Shore it's a holdup! Fork your broncs, boys! It can't have happened long ago."

Billy halted and turned. "We'll join them," he said to his two pards. "Sing Lo was coming along that road with our supplies. He should have beat the stage to town."

And as the Circle J boss spoke, he was looking at the sharp-featured Salty Conway, who was shouldering up. There was a hard grin on Salty's thin lips, but it vanished as his eyes locked with Billy's.

A strange feeling passed between them, which neither could account for. And the Circle J boss wondered about Salty Conway's presence in town during the holdup. The stranger and his gang could have had nothing to do with it. Some other coyotes had done the job. Who were they?

"Yuh ain't shootin' for the turk?" Salty Conway said coolly to Billy.

"No," the Circle J boss replied stiffly. "Not *now*."

And he pushed out of the gathering crowd with Buck and Joe, unable to understand why he had put so much emphasis on that last word. Salty Conway's eyes had narrowed as Billy said it.

CHAPTER III.

CAPTIVE'S CLEW.

THERE were more than twenty riders in the posse that roared out of Twin Rivers on the road to the county seat. It was a race from the start.

Half the ponies were fast range broncs. The dust that rolled up from the wagon ruts choked the laggards, who tried to swing off the trail and into the sage.

Billy pressed his powerful chestnut bronc hard to get ahead of the dust. He had bred the mount from a thoroughbred and a mustang, and it had never been beaten in the Twin Rivers section. Ordinarily, he would have saved its wind until striking the tracks of the bandits, but he was deeply worried about Sing Lo, and was anxious to reach the scene of the robbery before the posse destroyed the prints about the stage.

Ducking low to the pommel, he yipped for speed, guiding off the road to pass riders who had got a head start on him. He heard Joe and Buck shouting for him to wait. But Billy went on, riding for all he was worth.

He flashed past Sheriff Jim Hawks, whose white bronc was built for long travel and not for quick speed. The lawman yelled to the Circle J boss to keep the first arrivals at the robbery away from the stage.

The Circle J boss waved a hand and drove on. Ahead of him, he saw not more than six horsemen galloping hard down the road. Two hombres were trailing him fast. Billy cast a glance behind and was surprised to see Salty Conway quirting a fine sorrel Morgan.

One of Salty's tough friends was on another Morgan, with long, tapered legs and sturdy chest. They were animals that no ordinary waddy had money enough to own. Billy scowled darkly.

"Stretch into it, Danger hoss!" He leaned forward to speak to his chestnut. "We can't be licked by those hombres."

His bronc laid back its ears and went to work with a will. Hopping sage, cutting around prairie-dog villages, the horse needed no guidance. It angled back to the road as it caught up with the leading posse riders. There, the going was easier, and the animal's hoofs thun-

dered over the trail, kicking back gravel and dust.

Behind him, Billy heard Salty Conway shout angrily to move aside so that he would be able to pass without eating dirt.

Billy rolled his spurs gently along the chestnut's flank, and the animal released a burst of speed that left Salty Conway in the lurch. But the fancy-dressed gent was no mean rider, and his sorrel was not to be sneezed at.

All the way down the road, around turns, through patches of dark cedar, and over low ridges, the Circle J boss heard his rival coming like an express train.

Billy's lead increased to a hundred yards, then another. He knew he was tiring his bronc. He tried to lose Salty Conway from sight, but could not shake the fellow off.

The landmarks of Red Arrow gulch appeared ahead, and Billy sped down the steep grade without checking his horse. He swung dangerously around a turn, and the noise of Salty's following hoofs faded out.

Ahead of Billy, a big pine tree blocked the road. He yipped to his bronc, and it slowed down. As it did, the thudding of Salty's horse's hoofs sounded behind again. Billy's chestnut broke from a gallop to a trot, then stiffened into a halt. Before the animal was at a standstill, the Circle J boss was out of the saddle, and leaping through the boughs of the fallen pine.

He saw the stage and the standing teams immediately. He stopped short, eyes flicking to the road, where all tracks had been blotted out by a dragged gunny sack. Billy's face went hard. He ran to the open door of the stage, glanced inside, and found the broken pieces of a padlock that had been shot away.

"The stage driver an' the guard didn't do it," he muttered, turning to a big front wheel, up which he climbed to the box seat.

There he studied the wooden foot rest for sign of crimson stain. Seeing none, he looked at the left wheel, where he found evidence that a wounded man had fallen from the driver's box. From the height, Billy glanced left and right at the brush, and his sharp eyes did not miss the broken foliage where a buckboard had been turned on the road.

"Sing Lo's rig was taken!" the Circle J boss exclaimed.

A sorrel bronc was plowing to a halt behind the fallen pine, through the boughs of which soon thrashed Salty Conway, a six-gun in his hand. The man stopped short, glancing at the road, then up at the Circle J boss on the stage. It seemed to Billy that Salty's trigger finger tightened a bit, then relaxed. The man's lips curled in a sneer.

"What did yuh find?" Salty inquired in a cold tone.

Billy climbed down from the stage and started toward the pine barricade.

"How far back is the sheriff?" the Circle J boss asked.

"Why wait fer the law?" Salty Conway snapped. "Are yuh goin' ter let them skunks git away with the loot?"

Billy started through the pine tree. "Skunks is right!" he snapped without answering the question.

"Smart, eh?" he heard Salty growl behind him.

A heated wave of anger swept the Circle J boss, but he held on to himself. This was no time to call Salty Conway's hand. Later, but not now. Billy was not used to taking digs from Salty's kind, nor could he be bluffed. The fate of Sing Lo was worrying him, and that was

more important than his rising feud with Salty Conway.

Billy could see riders coming toward the pine tree. The first was one of Salty's tough friends, with the red-headed Joe Scott not far behind. Several punchers followed them. Buck Foster hove into view, and then the gray-haired Sheriff Hawks.

Billy walked to his bronc and swung to the saddle, waiting for the posse to come up. He refused to answer the shouts of the first riders. But to the sheriff's call the Circle J boss replied:

"It looks like the guard an' the driver were shot. Sing Lo, our cook, was comin' along the road in a buckboard. The coyotes stole it an' made back down the trail. There was a lot of grub in the wagon."

Sheriff Hawks was dragging his bronc to a halt. "Good work, Billy," he called. "Let's get around the pine an' hit the trail."

Buck Foster was staring hard at Billy. "Yuh mean our Thanksgivin' feed has been swiped!" he exclaimed. "By heifers, that's the dirtiest trick I ever heard of!"

Joe Scott wheeled his roan beside Billy. "Any sign of what happened to Sing Lo?" he asked.

"The outlaws might have made him drive the team away for them," the Circle J boss answered, spurring his chestnut to climb the cliff of the gulch to get around the fallen pine. "You take the right side of the road, Joe. I'll watch the left for where the rig turned off. It ought to be easy trackin'."

Sheriff Jim Hawks was shouting to the large posse that he didn't want all the men with him. The lawman called out the names of half a dozen waddies for aid. Then, he instructed the rest to back-track the bandits, move the tree, and take the stage on to Twin Rivers.

Billy and Joe, followed by Buck Foster, prodded around the cliff, and slid their horses down into the road where the stage was standing. They didn't wait for the sheriff. They spurred their broncs past the stage and along the road that led to the county seat.

It was easy to see the marks left by the stage and the buckboard coming to Red Arrow Gulch. Joe pointed out the evidence of the buckboard going away from it. The redhead was an expert tracker, and he prided himself on his ability. As he swung to the right of the trail, Billy turned to the left to watch for sign where the rig had turned off.

Their pace was fast. Indian summer had covered the road with a fine thick dust that it would take winter snow to wash away. The marks of the stage wheels and the buckboard coming and going could not be missed. But Billy made sure that there were three lines of tracks, not two, which latter would mean that the buckboard had turned off.

They were ahead of the posse, and several times Billy turned in the saddle to look back. He was trying to see Salty Conway among Sheriff Jim Hawks's riders, but there was no sign of the fellow.

Had the coyote gone on back to Twin Rivers to claim his twenty-pound turkey? The holdup might have brought an end to the shooting contest, and the Circle J outfit would not get another chance.

For five miles, Billy, Buck, and Joe rode hard, always ahead of the posse. It was the redhead who spied the place where the buckboard had turned. His eyes were as sharp as an eagle's. He yelled excitedly, dragging his roan to a halt,

then swung it off the trail onto grassy prairie.

"They turned south!" Joe cried. "The ground is dry, but they broke sagebrush. Come on, boys, I can follow it!"

Billy swerved his chestnut, with Buck behind him. They could no longer see the marks of the wheels. Although the buckboard had been loaded, it was light and had traveled fast. So fast that it had been unable to avoid the sagebrush, which it broke.

The Circle J boss was eying the range to make sure that Joe was not missing anything. So it was Billy who made an important discovery. He caught the flutter of a piece of brown wrapping paper that had blown off to the side of the route.

Reining his chestnut, he let his pards go on. Dismounting beside the paper, he picked it up, seeing that it was a section that had been torn away from a store bundle.

"Joe!" he shouted suddenly, then leaped for his bronc.

Riding hard after his pards, he again studied the marks made by punching the paper against a box nail. A ranch brand had been outlined by somebody. And that person, Billy was certain, could be nobody but Sing Lo.

The redhead and the veteran had slowed down to wait for him.

"What's wrong?" Buck Foster yelled.

"Look here," Billy replied, halting beside them. "Sing Lo could have done this while tied in the buckboard. He might have torn a bundle an' marked it on a box nail. See! He's made the Triangle X brand."

The veteran reached for the paper. "Waal, I'll be a horned toad!" he exclaimed. "I never give the heathen credit fer thet much hoss sense."

"The Triangle X!" Joe Scott ejaculated. "That's the old ranch west of hyar, Billy. Yuh remember how some tough hombres took up a homestead on it last spring. They didn't hang out in Twin Rivers."

"Sure, the boss is Moon Murfree," Billy replied. "Do you think Sing Lo recognized him?"

"Moon Murfree!" Buck Foster exclaimed. "By heifers, I know that fellar. He's an upstandin' gent. The heathen must be off his nut. Why, that thar Moon Murfree rode by our Antelope Creek pasture four weeks ago. I was gatherin' stock, an' he stopped ter tell me that he never seen nobody work so slick an' fast as yores truly."

Billy and Joe glanced meaningly at each other.

"This bears investigatin', pard," the Circle J boss said. "If Moon Murfree did that stage job, he might try to lose his trail an' swing back to his ranch."

"What's his brand doin' on that paper?" the redhead asked, staring at Buck.

"How does I know?" the veteran demanded hotly. "Mebbe the heathen was jest practicin' punchin' brands, an' he tossed that one out. I'm tellin' yuh that Moon Murfree ain't no cutthroat. He said as how I had one o' the best-trained cuttin' ponies he ever seen."

Billy stuffed the brown wrapping paper in his chaps pocket. "Joe," he told the redhead, "you keep to this trail. I'll cut across country to take a look at the Triangle X Ranch. It won't take an hour. When the posse catches up with you, leave a rider on Squaw Butte south of here to tell me where the tracks lead. You fix it so I'll find you again quickly."

Buck Foster tugged at his walrus mustache ends. "Yo're goin' on a wild-goose chase," he said. "What if we run inter them holdup skunks?"

"You ought to know what to do," Billy chuckled. "But I don't think you'll overtake them before I catch up with you again."

His chestnut was wheeling, and Billy rolled his spurs. The horse was off, striking due west across the rolling plain toward the western foothills.

Billy would avoid the posse, which he could see coming a mile away. He needed no help from them—not when a member of his outfit was being held captive. Circle J had been able to settle its own troubles in the past and could do so again.

CHAPTER IV.

GUN TRAP.

IT was a twelve-mile ride to the old ranch that Moon Murfree had squatted on. Half of the journey was across open range, and then Billy took to the draws leading into the pine foothills. He knew the country well from having hunted for strays and wild horses, so he made exceptionally good time. But on nearing the suspected ranch, the Circle J boss slipped into deep gullies and through brush and timber to hide his approach.

And when he reached a deep ravine just behind Moon's cabin ranch house, Billy halted his bronc, swung to earth, and left it to wait. On foot, he sneaked up the gorge and climbed the cliff. Wriggling over the rim, through a deep thicket of hazel brush, from which the leaves had long since fallen, the Circle J boss had a view of the Triangle X headquarters.

Billy lay for several minutes studying the layout. There was no smoke coming from the ranch-house chimney. The corral was empty, and the old barn doors were open to show that no broncs were inside. Farther away, a handful of cattle was grazing in a pasture.

The ranch was in bad shape, with a broken wagon standing before the bunk house, where the windows were smashed.

A scowl creased the puncher's brow, for it didn't please him to see an outfit so run down. It looked as if Moon and his saddle-tramp hands had pulled their stakes, and left a few head of stock to get through the snowy winter as best they could.

"That would be a reason for robbing the stage," Billy said to himself. "They needed cash."

He crawled through the bare brush and into the high dry weeds behind the ranch house. Experience had taught him not to be too sure. Ears tense for sound, he sneaked to the back door of the ranch house, and found it closed, but not locked. He stood a moment listening. There was no sound.

Billy drew a six-gun, opened the door slowly to prevent it from squeaking, and slipped into a shadowy kitchen. He halted, staring at the unwashed plates on an old table. Moon had had breakfast in his ranch house, but the stove fire was now out.

There was an empty whisky bottle near the coffeepot, and that was a bad sign. Why had Moon's men been drinking so early in the morning?

Billy moved across the kitchen on his toes. He halted at the entrance to a narrow hallway. His eyes slowly became adjusted to the gloom, and he saw a bedroom door

ajar. He slipped down the hallway, passing the bedroom, and came to a pair of curtains that hid the living room. Parting the folds of the draperies, he peered into the large front quarters of the house.

"Nobody!" he muttered, holstering his six-gun.

And just as he spoke, he heard a sharp click from a corner of the living room. It was too familiar a sound for him not to recognize. It was the cocking of a six-gun.

Billy froze, hand still clasped about the butt of his own holstered weapon. He knew that his presence was detected. Perhaps an enemy had been waiting for him. It could be Moon Murfree alone, or Moon's saddle-tramp hands. Billy drew his weapon, and cocked it. The click of its hammer sounded loudly in the silent house.

A chill alarm swept the Circle J boss. To go through the curtains into the living room of the ranch house meant to walk right into hot lead. He fell back, hugging the wall of the hallway. Lifting a boot, he made the curtains sway. At the same time, he shouted:

"Here I come, Moon, you murderin' snake!"

But Billy didn't charge the living room. He kept hugging the wall of the room. As he spoke, a thunderous blast shook the ranch house. Bullets whipped through the curtains, whined up the hall, missing him, and smashing into the door of the kitchen.

Billy was counting the shots to determine how many gunmen were laying in wait for him. He thought that three guns had spoken.

The Circle J boss whirled to see if he was trapped from behind. He was not a moment too soon. His eyes fastened on a six-gun barrel poking around a corner of the bedroom door just behind him. Billy jerked up his own weapon, and dropped low to the floor, just as a shaggy head appeared from the bedroom.

Crash! The Circle J boss fired.

He was none too quick. His lead struck the skulker just as the fellow triggered. But Billy's bullet threw the snake back into the bedroom, so that the man's shot went wild.

Without hesitating, Billy leaped to the bedroom door and inside. His smoking weapon was cocked and ready. He found another unshaven hombre rearing up from behind a cot. The Circle J boss threw himself aside, firing at the same time, and caught the second foe in the chest with a bullet.

Now, from the living room of the ranch house, yells were sounding. Billy could hear the thud of boots, and the roar of six-guns shooting into the hallway. He crawled across the bedroom floor, past the body of the first man that he had shot, and slammed the door. Then he lay low, listening.

Outside in the hall a voice cried: "He's in the bedroom. He must have shot Sam an' Pinto. We've got him corralled. Git outside an' cover the window."

Billy caught his breath. "Salty Conway!" he exclaimed, recognizing the voice. "What's he doin' here?"

No time for an answer. Billy's life was in danger. He had beefed two of Salty's gang, and the others would take revenge. Turning, the Circle J boss scuttled across the floor to the bedroom window, and knocked out the glass with his six-gun barrel.

A weapon exploded outside, and a bullet zipped in the window, missing Billy by a fraction. But he had detected the source of the shot. An hombre was hiding outside at the

corner of the barn. The fellow had been there some time, and had not just come up. So Billy realized that Salty had tried to force him to climb out the window to his death. Salty's yell to his gang to cover the window was a stall to make Billy believe it was not guarded.

"Slick!" the Circle J boss growled, retreating from the window to a corner of the bedroom. "I'll have to use my head."

He lay silent for several minutes, listening to the thud of boots in the other parts of the house. Now and then he heard voices whispering. Finally, Salty shouted from the hallway.

"Come on out, arms reachin', cowboy. We're arrestin' yuh fer stage robbery."

Billy's gray eyes widened. "Stage robbery!" he exclaimed, and then he called: "Conway, you play tinhorn poker. Change your tune."

There was a short silence, and then the bedroom door was flung open. Billy's gun covered the entrance. But he saw no man. Salty had done the trick by turning the knob and kicking the door inward without showing himself.

"We back-tracked the stage gang hyar like Sheriff Hawks told us ter do," Salty Conway yelled. "We figured yuh'd come back hyar with the loot, cowboy. Yuh don't stand a chance. We'll burn down this cabin ter git yuh out."

Billy's lips curled in a hard grin. "You couldn't have been waitin' here for Moon Murfree by any chance, could you, Salty?"

There was a hard laugh from the hiding Salty Conway.

"Tryin' ter accuse me o' crooked work ter save yore own skin, eh?" the gunman replied. "It won't work. I was in Twin Rivers when that holdup took place. Yuh an' yore Circle J bunch weren't in town. Do we burn yuh alive, or do yuh surrender?"

Billy West bit his lips. It was true that he and his pards had been riding to Twin Rivers during the holdup on the county-seat road. But nobody in town would believe that Circle J had killed the stage driver and the guard.

Salty Conway might. He didn't count. There was a chance that he had back-tracked Moon Murfree from the holdup scene to this cabin. There was also a chance that Salty was in cahoots with Moon Murfree, and had come here to get a share in the loot.

The Circle J boss was trapped, and he knew it. If caught, Salty would kill him. Billy had to escape. He didn't want to be burned alive in the cabin.

There was no chance that anybody from Twin Rivers would arrive to save him. His own pards and the sheriff were following the other trail of Moon Murfree, who might not return to his cabin.

Billy West studied the walls of the room. He couldn't get out the window or by the hall door. Salty's men were covering those exits. The Circle J boss glanced down at the rotten floor of the cabin. The planks were not nailed securely. The spikes had rusted, and he could easily pull up the boards.

"Nothing like trying," he said to himself, and got to his feet.

On tiptoe, he slipped along the wall to a corner of the room near the hall. There, he bent, worked his fingers into a crevice between two floor boards, and pulled up. At the same time, he shouted loudly to hide the noise of spikes breaking loose from rotten supports.

"I'm waitin' for you, Salty! Come get me, or I'll be coming out to

lift your scalp. Moon Murfree ain't comin' back here. He double-crossed you, and you know it. This is a private feud between you an' me."

Billy had the floor plank up as he heard Salty Conway snarl with rage.

"Burn him out!" the gunman's voice cried out. "He's tryin' ter frame us."

Below Billy, there were two feet of depth from the level of the floor to the earth. He lowered himself through the hole made by the absent plank and lay on the damp dirt. Ahead of him, he had a clear open passage of escape, and started crawling under the cabin.

His route was to the north, directly under the floor of the hallway and the living room. Above his head he could hear the thud of boots. He halted his advance, listening, and determined that Salty's men were piling furniture in the hallway. His nostrils caught the odor of smoke curling down through the crevices in the floor above him.

Billy started ahead again, quickly. He had to get out from under the cabin before Salty's men completely surrounded it. There was a bush-whacker already waiting for him on the south side of the building. But he had chosen the north side. Moving fast, he came to the edge of the cabin, peered out to the open, and saw tall weeds, with a clump of pine not fifty feet farther on.

The Circle J boss drew a six-gun, cocked it, and took a deep breath.

CHAPTER V.

KILLER'S AIM.

MOON MURFREE and his two pards had not made the speed that they had counted on when they drove off with the buckboard load of Circle J supplies. The bronc team was tuckered from its long trip from the county seat.

Moon drove, letting his saddle bronc trail behind the tailboard. His two aids rode their ponies on ahead, picking the route where the least track would show. They also herded on the riderless broncs of their two dead pards.

They swung down the prairie for ten miles before turning to the foothills through a draw. Moon was angling for a shoulder of a Bitterroot ridge. When there was no more open travel, he halted before the timber, and leaped down to unharness the team.

"Yuh hombres pack the bodies into the brush an' hide 'em," Moon ordered his men. "An' do a good job of it. We don't want 'em found."

The bald-headed saddle tramp grinned wickedly. "How about the chink?" he asked. "Do yuh still figure on takin' him with us? We can't spare a bronc fer him ter ride."

Moon's eyes narrowed. "I'll load him on one o' the buckboard critters that we're usin' fer pack animals."

Baldy traded glances with the runted saddle tramp. It was apparent that they had been talking about the Chinaman when riding alone. They didn't like the idea of letting Sing Lo live.

Moon watched them drag the dead hombres from the buckboard, sling them on their broncs, and ride off. Sing Lo was bound hand and foot, and he grinned at Moon.

"Mistlee Murflee velly good hom-blay," the Circle J cook said.

"Shut yore face, yuh yella snake!" the rustler snapped. "I don't want no thanks from yuh. I'm keepin' yuh ter save my own skin. Mebbe I should blow yore brains out."

Moon led the unharnessed team to the rear of the buckboard and began packing them with the Circle J supplies. The rustler was no novice at the job. He could throw a diamond hitch.

But there was little time for him to determine what was in the burlap bags and the wooden cases that Sing Lo had bought at the county seat. Moon chose the objects which made the easiest packs. He had only four horses, the team and the two saddle broncs of the dead rustlers, for the job.

He had loaded one buckboard bronc and tied the pack before Baldy and the runt returned. On the second animal, Moon was forced to make a smaller pack. He carried the bound Chinaman from the rig and lashed him to the horse, head and legs down.

It was an uncomfortable position for the Circle J cook, but Sing Lo made no protest. He seemed to fear for his life, and held silent, watching the loading of the remaining two horses.

"We'll make for the Bitterroot ridge an' cross inter Idaho," Moon Murfree said to his two henchmen. "Yuh take what is left in the chink's buckboard, an' tie everything yuh kin behind yore saddles."

Baldy and the runt snorted in disgust. They had seen Moon stuff the stage loot into his saddlebags, and they didn't like it. He made no move to load his saddle pony. He wanted it to travel light. Mounting, Moon rode aside to wait for Baldy and the runt.

"Hurry up; we ain't got all day," the rustler boss ordered. "Yuh two drive the pack broncs ahead. I'll cover the back trail."

Baldy turned at that, his eyes blazing. "Yuh always take the easy job, don't yuh?" the saddle tramp demanded.

"Who thought up that stage job an' made it work?" Moon shot back at him, hand near a gun butt. "If yuh want an argument, Baldy, yuh kin have it."

"I'll wait," the bald-headed saddle tramp sneered, and swung into his saddle.

"Shore we will," the runted tramp added, mounting.

Moon's lips tightened. He expected trouble, and was determined never to show his back to the pair. It was not going to be long before he carried the fight to them.

He couldn't trust them. They were better dead than alive. They'd never share the loot in his saddlebags. But he needed supplies at his hide-out, and they would have to help him get the pack animals to such a place.

Baldy and the runt prodded the pack animals into the timber, and Moon Murfree followed them carefully. Their route was always upgrade, through gulches, across slide rock, and into deep brush. They tried to hide their trail as best they could, but there were too many broncs in the party to lose all sign.

Moon constantly called out advice as to direction, his hand always on his gun butt. He had to keep a close watch on his men's arms to see that they didn't draw and shoot. So Moon didn't have much opportunity to watch the ground. Otherwise, he would have discovered an alarming fact.

On the pack horse carrying Sing Lo, a bag of cornmeal had broken open, and the yellow grain was spilling onto their trail at every fifteen to twenty feet. The Chinaman might have had something to do

with the accident, for his hands were tied in front of him, and he could have worked his finger nails into the cornmeal sack. And in addition to cornmeal, handfuls of cranberries and raisins were falling from the Chinaman's pack horse.

For a full hour, the stage bandits climbed through the foothills to the Bitterroot ridge, never suspecting what was happening behind them. It was Moon Murfree who first noticed an unusual fact. His quick ears caught the cawing of crows on their back trail. The higher the bandits climbed, the better view they had of the timbered country that they left behind.

On an open stretch of slide rock, Moon once turned in the saddle and looked back. His eyes found several flocks of birds flying over different sections of the trail. They were making quite a disturbance when buzzards and hawks mixed up with crows. Air fights were taking place. And Moon saw birds swoop downward into the timber, then sail up again.

"Sufferin' catfish!" the rustler boss exclaimed. "What's got inter them birds? They wasn't there when we came along."

He turned in the saddle quickly to face Baldy and the runt, who were staring at him.

"What's wrong?" Baldy called.

"Nothin'," Moon replied coldly.

"Yuh said somethin' about birds," the runted saddle tramp spoke up. "I kin see 'em now. Say, thar's six or seven flocks o' them, Baldy. Look! They must have found a carcass."

Baldy had halted. "It's more'n one carcass. It's a lot o' them." Baldy caught his breath, staring at the pack animal carrying Sing Lo. "Look!" the bandit cried angrily. "That's the reason fer it. The chink opened a sack."

"Slaughter him!" the runted saddle tramp yelled.

Moon Murfree already had his hand on his six-gun. He saw Baldy and the other hombre grab for their weapons. Moon couldn't give them the chance to get the guns free. They might shoot him after the Chinaman. He heard Sing Lo howl for mercy. Moon was drawing fast. He rose up in his stirrups, the six-gun stabbed forward.

"I warned yuh, Baldy!" Moon shouted defiantly. "Now, yuh take it!"

Crash! The rustler sent a bullet smashing into Baldy's head as the latter whirled to defend himself.

Crash! Moon's gun spoke again, its bullet catching the runted bandit in the chest and knocking him off his bronc as he tried to shoot back. And as the man went down to the earth, Moon fired again, finishing him.

"Yuh sneak!" Moon screamed at Sing Lo, leveling his smoking weapon at the Chinaman. "I saved yuh from them two fools an' yuh double-cross me."

Sing Lo, hanging head down across the pack animal, showed no terror. Before, he had appeared scared of every threat directed at him. Now the Chinaman grinned confidently at the fuming Moon Mufree.

"Allee fair in war," the Circle J cook said. "Mistlee Murflee no shoot Chinee. Velly bad flor him to do. Circle J now clum after stage bandits. They find Sing Lo dead, then they never stop till they flind Mistlee Murflee."

Moon's finger relaxed on his trigger. A cold shudder went through

him at the thought of the Circle J outfit on his trail night and day. There was no doubt that they would connect the stage robbery with the Chinaman's absence. Moon might blame the murder of the stage driver and the guard on his saddle-tramp pards, but he couldn't do the same for a dead Chinaman.

"Rat!" the rustler snarled, brows knit in an ugly frown. "I still got use fer yuh. Yore outfit might catch up with me, but they'll trade my life fer yores."

He swung off his bronc, and clumped to the bodies of Baldy and the runt. These corpses he dragged off the trail and hid them in brush. Returning to Sing Lo, he stared down from the high slide of shale to the lower foothills in the distance, watching the birds.

He saw a flock of crows near the open range swoop up into the air and fly away. That could mean only one thing: Riders were hard after him. They might discover the reason for the presence of the birds, and they'd come faster.

Moon's forehead was wet with sweat. Growling like an angry bear, he unlashed the Chinaman from the pack horse. Sing Lo was light, and Moon could carry him easily. He took the cook back into the timber, gagged him, and bound him to a tree.

The rustler knew little of Sing Lo's past. The Chinaman was no ordinary cook. At one time he had been an assistant to a traveling magician, and he knew many tricks of sleight of hand. It was not beyond him to escape from knots that experts had tied about his wrists and ankles.

The Chinaman was devoted to his Circle J pards and had faced danger many times before with them. He held silent as Moon lashed him to the tree. But there was a twinkle in his slant eyes when the rustler left him, heading back to the pack animals.

Moon Murfree was badly scared. With a posse after him, he had to flee Montana. He was badly "wanted" in other States. No matter where he went, he was in danger.

He was not the kind of hombre who could live alone. He would have to seek the company of outlaw camps, and if he did, Salty Conway would find him, sooner or later. Word would go up and down the outlaw trails that Moon was hiding at some owl-hoot post, and Salty would come to kill him.

"I've got ter pay that old poker debt ter square things with Salty," Moon Murfree muttered desperately. "Mebbe Salty would fight the posse. He'd have ter help me if they caught me with him. He's got a bad reputation the same as me. I can't run out on Salty."

He swung aboard his bronc, threw in his spurs, and yelled at the pack animals and the two other saddle broncs left by Baldy and the runt. As Moon drove them on up the trail, he was figuring that the posse had not thought of visiting his old ranch cabin.

The law was hard after him. He might fool them by avoiding the Bitterroot ridge, and turning north in the foothills to sneak back to his cabin. There he'd find Salty Conway's gang. He'd square accounts, and with his old pards, Moon would make an escape.

If the law and Circle J caught up with him, he'd trade his life for that of the Chinaman left lashed to the tree.

Moon couldn't go fast enough. Driving six horses, four of them

loaded with grub, was not an easy task. Before he had gone a half mile, one bronc got away on him, and there was no time to catch it. He lost a second in the next mile.

Now the rustler was desperate. He figured that the posse would overtake him before he reached Salty Conway's gang at his cabin. Trembling with fear, Moon deserted the remaining four pack animals, and gave his horse quirt and spur.

He crashed through brush, ducked low-hanging pine boughs, and sped on. His route turned northward through gullies and across benches. He knew the country from having hid rustled cattle in it. His ranch was near. Another two miles, and he gazed ahead.

It was then that he noticed a column of smoke rising skyward at the spot where his ranch would be. Cold fear swept the bandit. He dragged his bronc to a plowing halt, listening. He could hear no shots. How had his cabin caught fire? Had Salty Conway burned it out of revenge?

"I better see," Moon said to himself. "I'll leave my hoss in that ravine behind the cabin, sneak up, an' make sure that Salty hasn't gone. I don't want him ter think that I ran out with the stage loot."

Moon spurred his bronc through the timber to the mouth of the ravine. It was a wonder that the horse didn't stumble. The bandit rode recklessly, crashing through hazel bushes, jumping fallen logs, skidding down steep grades.

At the bottom of the ravine, he halted, dismounted, and drew a rifle from a saddle scabbard. Climbing the cliff of the gulch, he sneaked over the rim and through the leafless brush.

Suddenly, Moon Murfree halted. He was looking at his flaming cabin. Out of the front and rear doors, Salty Conway's men were racing to hiding in the tall weeds surrounding the building. They were yelling for Billy West to come outside and take hot lead.

Then, with a gasp, Moon saw the Circle J boss. The bandit saw the puncher before any of Salty's gang, who were not on the north side of the cabin. And from underneath the northern edge of the flaming building, a waddy in a yellow silk shirt and bullhide chaps was crawling into the weeds and grass.

Billy West was making an escape, and Moon Murfree realized that unless Salty's men were warned, the Circle J boss would get away undetected. For a short second, the stage bandit hesitated, sinking to his knees in the brush and grass. He made a decision. With Billy West dead, Moon would have nothing to fear from Circle J.

Slowly, the rustler lifted the rifle to his shoulder to shoot the escaping Circle J boss.

CHAPTER VI.

A RAID.

BILLY WEST did not see Moon Murfree before it was too late. As he crawled out from under the burning cabin, he was listening to the taunting yells of Salty's gang. He could tell that they were in front of and behind the flaming trap, and on its southern side where the bedroom window was. They had neglected the north, plainly figuring that there was no escape for him in that direction.

Gun in hand, the Circle J boss leaped up from the ground and dashed northward, bent over, hoping to reach the brush and trees

ahead of him. His eyes focused in that direction for the nearest refuge.

At that moment, he glimpsed the cone of a hat lifting from behind a tangle of brier. He saw the glint of sunlight on a rifle at the same time, with the unshaven face of Moon Murfree pressed against the wooden gun stock. He knew that Moon had taken aim.

Billy dived headlong, not expecting to avoid the bullet. He was watching the rifle barrel for the flame of exploding powder. And at that instant he saw a small, black-garbed figure rear up behind Moon Murfree and strike down at the rifle barrel. The weapon exploded as the club in the small hombre's hand hit the barrel, and the bullet was driven into the earth.

"Sing Lo!" the Circle J boss cried, recognizing the yellow face of his cook.

No sooner did Billy hit the ground in his dive, than he was up again, racing forward. He saw Moon Murfree whirl upon the Chinaman, who tried to club the rustler on the head. Moon's arm whipped up, warding off the blow. And then Moon had caught the Chinaman with his hand, jerked him into his arms, and slammed him to earth in the tangled brush.

The Circle J boss was going fast. With a jump, he cleared the brush. He saw Moon and the Chinaman struggling. Moon's fist connected hard with Sing Lo's jaw as Billy came flying down on top of them. As the Circle J boss struck the rustler, he butted him off the cook, who was closing his eyes in unconsciousness.

"Skunk!" Billy cried, swinging a left fist, and missing Moon.

The rustler was on his back on the ground, and reached up to catch the six-gun that Billy still held in a right hand. Moon got hold of the barrel and jerked hard. But the Circle J boss kept his grip on the butt of the weapon. They grappled, fighting for the weapon that Billy had refused to shoot when he had the opportunity.

"Salty!" Moon shrieked. "Help!"

"Shut up!" Billy cried, and hooked a left to Moon's mouth.

The roar of the fire was drowning out the sounds of their struggle. Billy could hear roof timbers falling in the building where Salty Conway's gang thought him to be trapped. His one hope was to nail Moon Murfree before the gang discovered his fight.

Moon was no mean antagonist. He would not let go of the barrel of Billy's six-gun, and with a right arm he encircled the puncher's waist and started to roll over and over.

Thrashing like two wild animals, they came to the rim of the ravine, fought their way over, and slid down the cliff in a hail of gravel and rock. The barrel-chested Moon was on top of the Circle J boss as they stopped in the bottom of the gulch. Moon's right fist cracked Billy in the eye. With his left hand, the rustler kept jerking at the barrel of the puncher's gun.

Billy held that gun butt by his right fist, which was his best fighting hand. He knew that Moon would get the weapon sooner or later. So he let him have it. Suddenly. And in jerking it away, the rustler overbalanced himself.

The Circle J boss heaved up, bucking his foe off him. Moon fell in a sprawl, trying to reverse the gun from the barrel to the butt in order to shoot it. But Billy was on him before Moon could accomplish the trick. The Circle J boss swung

for the rustler's jaw with all his strength, and hit. It was a terrific blow that broke bone.

The white's of Moon Murfree's eyes showed. A grunt came from his opening mouth. His big body trembled and he lay still.

Billy straddled him, taking the six-gun away from Moon's hand. Turning, the Circle J boss saw a black-garbed figure crawling over the rim of the cliff above him. It was Sing Lo, who looked as sick as a pup.

"Mistlee Billy!" the Chinaman gasped. "You allee light?"

"Thanks to you, pard!" the Circle J boss replied. "Come down here an' help me hog-tie this lummox. What about Salty's gang?"

The Chinaman slid down the cliff, still groggy from the blow that Moon had dealt him.

"Lanch house all burn up," Sing Lo stuttered. "Blad homblay still wait flo' Mistlee Billy."

"You mean that they don't know I got away?"

"So be," Sing Lo answered.

Listening, Billy heard the crash of the cabin roof. Eyes lifting skyward, he saw sparks and smoke drifting away in the foothill breeze. And above the roar of the burning cabin, he detected the cheers of Salty Conway's gang.

"Scum!" the Circle J boss said, and went to work to bind Moon Murfree and gag him.

With the help of Sing Lo, Billy soon had the rustler hog-tied, so that nothing but keen-bladed knives would free him. The Chinaman was telling Billy how he had been left lashed to a tree back in the foothills, and had freed himself in no time at all. Then Sing Lo had run after Moon, and found a saddle pony wandering loose.

He kept on Moon's trail easily. And seeing the smoke of the burning cabin in the distance, the Chinaman had ridden toward it with a speed equal to the rustler's. He had found Moon's horse in the ravine and seen the rustler crawling over the cliff. The rest, Billy knew.

"You certainly did a fine job, pard," the Circle J boss complimented the Chinaman. "I won't forget it. But what about the posse an' our holiday grub?"

"Posse come soon," the cook replied, grinning. "They follow tracks. They find hoss with Circle Ay glub. Mistlee Murflee have holdup money in saddlebags."

Billy looked up the ravine to where two broncs were standing. His own chestnut was waiting down the gulch, in the opposite direction and had not been seen by Moon.

"Our fight's with Salty Conway now," he said. "He was in cahoots with Moon Murfree on that stage job. There's about six gunmen in his gang—too many for us in a brush fight. Let me take a look-see to find out what is happening."

Climbing the cliff, Billy crawled into the brush to where Moon's rifle lay. He holstered his six-gun and picked the weapon up. Removing his hat, he lifted his head above the grass and brier until his eyes focused on the ruins of the cabin.

The walls and the roof of the rotten old building had collapsed. Billy saw Salty Conway's gang standing about, grinning at the flaming pile of logs and timbers. Not far away, on the east, a gunman was approaching with a cavvy of saddle broncs. Billy watched Salty Conway come out of the barn and call to his men. The gunman's voice carried far.

"All right, hombres," were Salty's

words. "That waddy is a roasted carcass by now. Fork yore broncs. We've got ter git out o' hyar afore anybody else turns up. The posse ain't in Twin Rivers. We'll loot that town before the law gits back. Moon Murfree double-crossed us. We'll make Twin Rivers pay fer it."

Billy's hands tightened on the rifle. With one shot, the Circle J boss could put an end to Salty Conway's plans. But in killing the leader of the gang, he'd start a fight with the six remaining toughs. As Billy had told Sing Lo, they were too many for him. They'd surround him in the brush, and he'd have to hole up to wait for help. If it came, Salty's men might escape.

It was beyond the Circle J boss to bushwhack a man. He couldn't kill Salty. If he didn't, the gunman might get away with his gang.

The Circle J boss turned back to the ravine, where Sing Lo awaited him. He knew that Salty Conway thought him dead. That gave Billy an idea. Let the outlaws stage their raid on Twin Rivers. They'd ride into a gun trap of the same sort that they had set for him in Moon Murfree's cabin. Perhaps the town of Twin Rivers was deserted by most of the fighting citizens, but there would be enough old-timers left to do some scrapping.

"An' I'll handle that target-shootin' Salty by myself," Billy growled, sliding down the cliff. He halted before the Chinaman. "Sing Lo, take Moon's bronc with the stage loot, an' ride back to find Buck and Joe. Tell them that Salty is raidin' Twin Rivers."

"How 'bout Mistlee Billy?" Sing Lo asked.

"Me, I'm throwin' a big surprise into that scum," the Circle J boss answered, turning down the ravine to his bronc. "I've got to beat 'em to town. Twin Rivers is goin' to collect a lot of buzzards for its Thanksgivin' dinner, or I'll know the reason why."

He was off on the run before the Chinaman could protest.

CHAPTER VII.

SIX BULL'S-EYES.

WHEN the Circle J boss reached his waiting mount, he had already made up his mind about a route to Twin Rivers. It would have to be a round-about course, for Salty's men would take the direct trail to town. They had fine horses, and the advantage of traveling a packed road. Billy was forced to the draws and benches.

He leaped to the saddle and rolled his spurs. Time was valuable. If Salty spotted him, Billy didn't know but that the gang would avoid Twin Rivers, and escape. The Circle J boss was determined to finish them off.

The puncher's ride was a wild one. Recklessly, he pushed the chestnut through the ravine and up brushy slants. Here and there, the mount had open draws and vales to cross. Then it ran like an antelope.

But all the while Billy knew that the gang was thundering along the trail to Twin Rivers. He couldn't see them. There wasn't a moment to waste in halting on a high hilltop and searching for them. Billy kept riding for all he was worth.

It was long before the Circle J boss emerged from the foothills, and ducked into an arroyo that would cover his approach to town. With three miles of open sagebrush country to cross, he let the chestnut have its head to run its best. Yipping, gently brushing its flanks with his

spurs, Billy crouched low over the pommel, fearing that his hat might lift above the rim of the swales and be seen by Salty from a distance.

The Circle J boss came out of a coulee behind a small butte west of Twin Rivers. Salty would be entering town from the south. Billy struck for the back of the trading post. He was a hundred yards from the rear yards of the cabins when he heard shots.

Billy's heart caught in his mouth.

"They beat me!" he exclaimed. "Those Morgan cayuses were too fast. I took too big a swing."

Speeding over the last hundred yards to the rear of the town's bank building, the Circle J boss drew his six-gun. He brought his bronc to a plowing halt, leaping from the saddle.

The shooting seemed to be in the main street of the town. Billy raced for the back door of the bank, thinking that Salty's men would strike first at that building. His hand grasped the knob. The door was locked.

"Buzztails!" the Circle J boss exclaimed, and whirled to run around the rear corner of the double-logged structure.

Again he heard the roar of shots, then the high-pitched yells of men. Billy turned the corner of the bank building. His batwing chaps almost tripped him as he sped toward the street down the side of the structure. And at that moment, he saw seven riders dismounting in the street, as calmly as if they were a ranch outfit on their way to cash monthly checks.

The Circle J boss noted Salty Conway making for the doors of the bank. Salty's men were following him, and one man was left to hold the broncs.

None of them was doing the shooting. The roar of guns came from farther down the street, near the post office. And Billy suddenly realized that some gray-whiskered old hombres were still shooting for the turkey.

"Good grief!" Billy cried, stumbling to a halt so that the outlaw holding the broncs in the main street would not see him. "The only gun hands in town are at that turkey shoot. Salty has a clear avenue of escape."

As he spoke, he whirled to a side window of the bank building and peered through the glass pane. He was just in time to see Salty Conway lead the bandits into the big room.

There was a pink-faced, bespectacled teller in an iron cage across the floor. Billy saw the teller look up, face paling. Salty Conway's men went for their six-guns, yelling orders for the bank employee to grab air.

The Circle J boss went into action to save the teller's life. With one stroke, Billy chopped out the glass of the barred window. A wild cowboy yell echoed from his lips. He saw the teller ducking behind the counter of the cage as Salty Conway's gang whirled to the window at the crash of broken glass. Their guns jerked up to shoot.

Crash! Billy's weapon was first, but he could take no sure aim.

He wanted Salty Conway, but the bandit boss was ducking floorward as Billy triggered. The Circle J boss fired at the next nearest man, driving a bullet into him. And as Billy shot, he dropped below the window sill.

Zing-g-g! A fusillade of bandit lead swept out of the broken window over Billy's protected head, and

sped to the side of the shack next door.

Salty's voice rose in a howl of rage, and the Circle J boss heard boots thudding toward the front door of the bank.

Billy whirled, ready for anything. He was none too soon. His up-whipping six-gun was trying to find a target in the street. One of the gang had been left out there to hold the gunmen's broncs. Billy saw that hombre stabbing a weapon into aim at him.

Wham! The rancher's .45 exploded, its bullet speeding to the wrangling gunman to stop him from triggering.

The lead struck and knocked the hombre flat on the road under the standing broncs. Billy saw the saddle horses rear up in panic. He yelled at them, slamming two bullets over their heads, driving them to flight, as he raced toward the plank sidewalk.

Now the Circle J boss was at the front of the bank building, and he heard the boots of Salty Conway and the other outlaws coming toward the front door. Billy turned the corner of the log structure, vaulting up to the wooden sidewalk. His six-gun was level with his hip. It caught two bandits leaving the bank building to face him. Guns were in their hands.

The Circle J boss fired, charging the front door of the bank as he did so. His lead smashed the two leading gunmen backward into the path of Salty Conway and the remaining outlaws. Billy tried to throw lead into the rest, but his gun hammer clicked on empty shells. He leaped at Salty Conway, weapon uplifting to smash the raider boss on the skull.

"Give it to him!" he heard Salty yell, and the outlaw dodged aside out of Billy's charge.

The Circle J boss sailed into the two surviving bandits, gun barrel swinging. His weapon cracked the first one alongside of the ear as the man fired, missing because the blow threw his aim out. Then Billy plunged into the second like a bull on the prod. He carried the fellow with him right into the bank.

From the street, Salty Conway had begun to fire, and his lead followed Billy into the bank. But the Circle J boss had turned behind the wall in his struggles with the outlaw in his arms. He hit the man twice with a free left fist, then hurled him to the floor.

Panting with excitement, the Circle J boss whirled to the front door. A bullet from Salty outside came whizzing through. Then he heard the man's gun hammer clicking on empty shells.

"Salty!" Billy cried wrathfully. "You're takin' what is coming to you!"

With a leap, the Circle J boss was out the bank door, charging across the plank sidewalk. He saw Salty in the gutter near the hitch rail, empty gun in hand. Salty leaped backward and hurled his weapon straight at Billy.

The heavy .45 struck the puncher in the left shoulder, numbing it, but it did not stop him. He was going fast. Jumping across the gutter, he saw Salty snatching a pearl-handled gun from his left-hand holster. But Salty was not quick enough.

The Circle J boss was upon him. The empty six-gun in Billy's right hand rose and fell, clubbing Salty's left arm. With a howl, Salty dropped the weapon he was drawing, and swung viciously at Billy's jaw with a right fist.

The blow landed, almost tearing

Billy's head off. But he caught Salty in his arms and bore him down to the dust, thrashing, punching. Giddy, seeing red, Billy tried to hold the bandit down. The left shoulder of the Circle J boss was still numb from the blow dealt him when Salty had thrown the gun across the plank sidewalk.

"I'll show yuh!" Salty was yelling as he twisted out from underneath the waddy. "Yo're scrappin' Salty Conway now, not no tinhorn!"

Billy felt Salty's boot toe kick him in the midriff. It was a vicious jolt that almost took the wind out of the Circle J boss. He reared up to his knees, blinking.

It seemed that he saw four Salty Conways getting up in front of him. And Billy knew that the bandit was going to kick him again. It would be the end of the rancher if the outlaw did.

Dizzy, gasping for breath, Billy threw himself forward, reaching with a right hand for the bandit's ankle. He caught the leg that Salty was standing on while drawing back another leg to kick. With a jerk, Billy upset the owl-hooter, and Salty went down floundering.

"Not through yet," Billy ejaculated, scuttling forward to catch him again before he could get away.

"Lay off me!" Salty yelled, rearing up.

Billy saw the outlaw's terror-stricken face just before him, and the Circle J boss swung a right fist with all the strength that he could muster. Salty's arms came up to block the blow, but too late.

Billy hit with the force of a mule's hoof. The Circle J boss felt his knuckles crack on jaw bone. He heard Salty's grunt of agony.

Billy fell forward on the raider, who quivered beneath him. The Circle J boss held him down to the road, trying to figure out if the outlaw was conscious or not. Billy's head was whirling, and shooting stars were passing before his eyes. He felt the shudder go out of the bandit, and then came the thudding of hoofs.

A cracked voice spoke from close behind the Circle J boss.

"All right, Billy." It was the bank teller speaking. "Yuh knocked him cold. Yuh kin git up. I got a gun trained on him. Hyar comes the sheriff an' yore pards."

Billy still sat on Salty Conway. Looking around, he saw the pink-faced bank teller, who stood with a horse pistol in hand. And behind the teller were four gray-whiskered hombres with guns. Billy recognized them as citizens of Twin Rivers.

"Have you been here long?" the puncher asked, grinning through bruised lips.

"Just in time ter see yuh land the haymaker," one of the old-timers chuckled. "We was shootin' fer the turk, an' didn't pay no attention ter the blastin' goin' on up hyar."

The Circle J boss took a deep breath and stood up, swaying on his feet. His eyes caught sight of Joe Scott and Buck Foster racing ahead of Sheriff Jim Hawks and Sing Lo, with several posse men strung out behind them. Billy wiped his forehead with a handkerchief.

"Who made the best score to-day in that contest?" the rancher asked.

"I reckon it was this varmint in the dust," one of the old fellows said. "He hit the bull's-eye six times. But it looks like yuh did jest as good, Billy. Yuh scored a hit six times on his gang, an' then yuh bagged Salty with a seventh shot o' yore fist. I reckon yuh win the turk."

"Them's my sentiments," the bank teller added.

Billy chuckled.

"Mebbe Buck Foster won't agree," the Circle J boss said. "Let's hear what he says."

Buck and Joe were coming to dusty halts in the road. The walrus-mustached veteran was first out of the saddle. He clumped forward, stared down at Salty Conway, then glanced at the bodies on the plank sidewalk. Buck tugged at the ends of his mustache.

"Huh!" he grunted. "I told yuh all along that Moon Murfree never had nothin' ter do with that thar holdup. Yuh should have stayed right hyar in town ter clear up, Billy. We've been chasin' crows an' hawks all over the country. Then the heathen crosses our trail ter tell us that some scum burned Moon's cabin an' was raidin' Twin Rivers."

Billy winked at Joe Scott, realizing that Buck didn't know the entire story.

"We bagged ourselves some buzzards for Thanksgivin', Joe," Billy said.

"Buzzards nothin'!" Buck Foster exclaimed. "By heifers, I'm shootin' fer that turk ag'in." A grin of triumph crossed his weather-beaten features. "An' I won't have no competition with that snake out o' the runnin'," he added, pointing a gnarled finger at the unconscious Salty Conway.

With that, Buck stalked off to the post office, where a twenty-pound bird was gobbling on the veranda.

Billy looked up at Sheriff Jim Hawks, who was the referee in the turkey contest.

"There ain't no way of stoppin' Buck," the Circle J boss said. "He'll be blasting at the target all afternoon until he makes a perfect score. Let him amuse himself. After it's all over, Joe an' me will take our turns."

The bank teller was whispering to the sheriff.

"No need for yuh to take a turn, Billy," Jim Hawks chuckled. "We're voting yuh the winner already. Buck Foster couldn't beat the score that yuh made in a hundred years."

Pore Buck kind o' got left out in the cold, thet time. He didn't get ary chance ter cut loose with his smoke-pole, either at bandits or bull's-eyes. Howsomever, it won't be long afore the pards are dabbin' their loops on some more trouble, and mebbe the veteran will have better luck then. Watch fer the next Circle J yarn. Yuh'll find it in an early issue o' Street & Smith's Wild West Weekly.

TOO MUCH TO EAT— NO EXERCISE!
THAT'S JUST THE TIME TO ALKALIZE!
ACID INDIGESTION
IT'S SILLY, DEAR, TO SUFFER SO.
I SHOULD HAVE DONE THIS LONG AGO.
HEADACHE
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Alka-Seltzer
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SLIGHTLY MORE IN CANADA

Double Cross at the Double Crescent

By George C. Henderson

Author of "Johnny Jump-up's Gun Fight," etc.

FOR the first time in his life, black-haired Hart Baxter was glaring into the cavernous muzzle of a six-gun. He noticed that only four cartridges were visible—four stubby lead slugs that seemed to be sticking their snouts out at him from the sides of the cylinder.

The sight at the end of the long barrel was an evil crescent of shiny steel, a scimitar of death. Back of that gun sight, held steady as rock, he saw the glowering square face and the shaggy, blocky head of a bull-necked killer.

That thick, corded neck and the massive flat jowls impressed themselves sharply on Hart's mind. Even more so than the dull-brown eyes, narrowed now to mere slits by suspicion and hate.

Hart Baxter, standing as stiff as a soldier, grinned impudently into "Bull-neck's" stony features and slowly shook his head.

"You got the wrong man, mister," he drawled. "No need to kill me. I'm a stranger here. Ain't got a thing that's worth riskin' yore neck for. And never expect to have. I'm just a boomer cow-punch, hittin' the sundown trail."

"That's what you said before, when I was disarmin' yuh," grunted the bull-necked jasper. "Don't repeat things. It makes me mad."

Tall, raw-boned, dark-eyed Hart Baxter rubbed his palms against his empty holsters and continued to smile at the gaping death of the big hogleg. Experience had taught him not to show fear.

He wasn't feeling any too good, however, over the prospects of being shot to death out here in the wilderness. He especially disliked the idea of being murdered while unarmed and helpless and for no reason at all. But his careless attitude did not betray his frame of mind.

Hart didn't know the killer's name, the reason for the stick-up, or who was back of it all. Bull-neck had got the drop on him and had taken his guns, without bothering to rob him of his small amount of valuables and money. Then the shaggy-haired gent had jabbed a six-gun at young Baxter's chest and calmly announced that he intended to kill Hart in a few minutes.

Young Hart Baxter did not look like a man who deserved to die like this. And he didn't feel as if his number was up, either.

Over six feet tall, dressed in big white Stetson, red bandanna, old white shirt, spotted calfskin vest and blue denim pants rolled above the tops of seedy, high-heeled boots, he was handsome, in the rough estimate of the rolling range. His features were rugged. His jet eyes were deep-set behind high cheek bones, giving him almost the appearance of a full-blooded Indian, which he was not. He was of Scotch-American ancestors, sometimes dour, more often laughing.

His quick wit had saved him in more than one ruckus, and he hoped it would again.

"It will make me mad to get shot, too," he chuckled. "So then we'll be two mad men. But right now I ain't much peeved at you, Bull-neck. Only curious."

"My name ain't Bull-neck," rumbled the shaggy gunman.

"Pardon me!" Hart bowed with exaggerated courtesy. "I reckon you wouldn't want to kill a feller unless you been introduced to him. I'm Hart Baxter, ramblin' buckaroo and nothin' else. I ain't got an enemy in the world that I know of. My relations are all dead. My home is wherever I happen to light. I didn't even know where I was going when you stopped me. I was just ridin'."

Hart was talking to distract Bull-neck's attention, to stall for time. His words were careless, but his eyes were busy studying this strange prowler, who seemed to want to kill him for no reason at all.

Was Bull-neck crazy? Hart tried to read his eyes, but he found them a blank dull brown. There was no insane light in them. Only an evil glint and dogged determination. Bull-neck was huge, thick-bodied, stupid, but at the same time he had a certain cunning.

"Where yo're goin', you won't do no ridin'," growled Bull-neck. "The golden stairs is too steep for broncs. Yo're goin' to leave yore saddle behind. Are yuh ready to take yore medicine?"

There was a dull finality about Bull-neck's tone that sent a surge of despair through Hart's body.

Once more his attention centered on that deadly, blued-steel shooting iron. The gaping hole, nearly a half inch in diameter, was only six inches long, but he could not see far enough into it to glimpse the nose of the cartridge nesting in the chamber.

He saw the cylinder slowly begin to turn. Below it a hairy, thick red

finger curled inside the rounded trigger guard, and still farther back a fat paw gripped the handle, thumb upraised, pressing back on the hammer.

As Bull-neck slowly pulled the hammer back, the stilettolike firing prong reared into view like the head of a rattler, drawn back to strike.

This was about all the movement that was visible to the eye. But Hart Baxter, knowing guns, visioned even more than that. He could picture the inner mechanism, the invisible portion of the hammer attached by a stirrup to the main spring, compressing the spring downward, raising the "hand" away from the rebound slide, the sear lifting up against the cylinder releasing bolt. Then that squeeze on the trigger and the stiff steel spring propelling the sharp hammer point into the cartridge primer. The deafening explosion! A hot bullet tearing through his flesh. His flesh!

"Go ahead!" said Hart. His voice was sharp, metallic. "I'm glad you ain't goin' to torture me, at least. Shoot straight. I couldn't stand it to be wounded."

At the word "torture" Bull-neck pricked up his ears. An evil light began to gleam in his dull-brown eyes. Hart saw it, and it gave him new hope. He was deliberately putting the idea of torture into the shaggy man's head, sparring desperately for time, knowing that every minute's delay gave him a better chance.

"Beggin', huh!" sneered Bull-neck. "Startin' to crawl. I thought you'd show yaller. Reckon maybe I better have a little fun with yuh, seein' as I've got to kill yuh, anyhow."

"S-s-see here!" Hart pretended to be terrified. "At least t-tell me why I got to die. I'm a stranger here. I don't know a soul within five hundred miles. Who is payin' yore to kill me?"

"Huh? Who said I was bein' paid to kill yuh?" demanded Bull-neck quickly. "Where did yuh git that idea?"

"Surely you ain't puttin' yore neck in the noose just for fun," insisted Hart. "If it was only robbery, you could take what little I got without wipin' me out."

Bull-neck seemed not to hear a word that Hart Baxter was saying. His eyes had dropped to the young cowboy's feet.

"Yippee!" he burst out. "Let's see yuh dance. Start shakin' them spurs and make it fast!"

Hart saw Bull-neck's gun muzzle drop from its dead-center aim on his chest. It was what he had been waiting for. The instant that gun pointed downward, young Baxter made a wild leap into the air, straight at the shaggy, square-headed gunman.

Br-r-rang! Bull-neck's gun slammed a bullet into the ground where Hart's feet had been.

The next instant, he went down from the impact of a hundred and eighty pounds of steely sinews and ivory-hard bone as Hart crashed into him.

The drawn gun flew from Bull-neck's fingers. His big hands, clawing out, grabbed Hart by the clothing, and they went down together. The force of the fall jarred them apart.

A squawl of pain burst from Bull-neck, who had lighted on a sharp rock. Both men got to their knees at the same time, within arm's reach of each other.

Hart, quick as lightning, smashed a whopping right against Bull-neck's jaw. The killer's head jerked back, but he was not knocked out by the

blow that would have finished a less tough hombre.

With a mighty roar, Bull-neck surged to his feet, pawing for his other gun. Hart, unarmed, poured a rain of blows into Bull-neck's face. A left to the nose. A right to the mouth. A hard jab followed by a right cross against the flat jaw.

Rights, lefts. Rights, lefts. Hart dusted his knuckles in a rapid tattoo into the bewildered bully's eyes, mouth, jaws, forcing him to stumble backward.

Bull-neck took all the blows standing. His huge jaws and thick neck absorbed those pile-driver punches. Never had Hart Baxter fought any one as tough as this. He had always knocked out his man when he managed to explode his walloping right on the button.

With a bellow like a wounded bear, Bull-neck spat out a tooth and yanked his other gun from its holster.

Like an acrobat going into a dance, Hart Baxter kicked upward, trying to knock the Colt from the killer's hand. He missed. Fell backward. Found himself looking into the muzzle of a gun that was flashing down to fire at him.

Instinct alone guided his next move. He was on the high sloping bank of the wooded creek. Like a tumbleweed, he doubled up and rolled.

Crack-crack-crack! Bull-neck's big .45 blasted slugs into the dirt in front of Hart Baxter.

But the tall, dark-haired cowboy was moving fast. He hurled himself off the bank in a dive. There was a moment of terrible suspense as he felt himself in mid-air. He wrapped his arms around his face.

His hurtling body hit twining vines, brambles that cut his flesh, a small sapling that caught him on the shoulder and propelled him off to the left. Brush rose all around him. Green creek-bottom foliage.

He heard Bull-neck charging through the bushes in pursuit, making as much noise as a proddy steer. Hart leaped to his feet and ran.

The killer was strangely fast on his feet for a man so large. He kept right on Hart's trail, firing at the young puncher every chance he got.

On the edge of a sharp rocky incline Hart crouched down behind a scrub oak, laid hold of a boulder and pushed. The big rock went tumbling downward, carrying pebbles cascading after it.

Bull-neck heard the noise and plunged in pursuit. Silent as a prowling cougar, Hart started to retrace his steps up the slope. He heard Bull-neck let out an angry bellow and turn to follow. Hart broke into a run, with the gunman charging after him.

He got a glimpse of a horse grazing on a service-berry bush. It was a claybank—his own mustang. A shrill whistle caused the bronc to jerk up its head and start toward him.

Bull-neck began shooting to scare the claybank away. The terrified animal started to turn. Hart barely reached it, snatched up the reins, vaulted into the saddle.

Crackety-crack-crack! Bullets snapped viciously around him.

He felt one burn across his left arm high up. Another clipped through his heavy, coarse black hair, which was now bare, since he had lost his big white Stetson.

Straight at Bull-neck's big black bronc he spurred. The black horse jerked free from its tie rope and started off. Hart felt his claybank flinch. It had been hit. It broke its stride, faltered.

Another shot. The pony uttered a

scream, almost like a human being, and fell.

Hart jumped clear and leaped toward Bull-neck's bronc. The horse turned, evaded him, plunged down into a wooded draw among spruce, pine and firs.

No shots came. Bull-neck's gun was empty.

"Now's my chance," thought Hart Baxter. "I've got to get mounted before that murderer can reload."

The frightened black cayuse turned off a wagon road into the deeper woods, carpeted by pine needles and leaf mold. Smelly tarweed tripped the cowboy up. The deep bed of leaves slowed him down.

Then miraculously he saw the black just around a turn, tugging at the tie rope, which had caught in the chaparral.

Blacky tossed his head. Whinnied. Hart's hand rested on its satiny rump. Then he had the tie rope and popped into the saddle.

Bang! Crack! Bang! Bull-neck saw him and opened fire.

A slug shattered the rifle stock, just as Hart reached down to pull the saddle gun from its sheath. A moment later, he reached cover.

Towering pine trees rose protectingly around him. The sound of pursuit died away. Blacky slowed to a running walk, shaking his head and champing on the bit.

Beneath a buckeye tree, Hart Baxter drew rein and took stock of the situation. One thing was instantly evident. He was lost. Towering mountain slopes rose all around him. This was a strange country. He didn't know a single landmark.

He examined his wounds, doctored them, then looked over Blacky to make sure the bronc was untouched. The rifle was ruined, useless. And his own holsters were empty.

In Bull-neck's saddlebags he found an old slouch hat and put this on. Also he found letters from a woman addressed to Burt Howland. He filled his canteen, put his empty holsters in the saddlebags, and gave the black cayuse its head.

II.

It took Hart Baxter two days to reach Silver Falls at the turn of Crooked River. Evening shadows lay thickly on the shake roofs and log walls of the scattered buildings. The hum of a lumber-mill saw rose to a shrieking crescendo as the steel teeth bit into a hard knot. Smoke twined upward from shale chimneys.

A party of cowboys dashed madly past Hart and joined a howling crowd gathered around a building at the far end of town.

Reining his mustang down to a walk, Hart approached the place cautiously. With no guns, he must be careful. He saw a party of silent, respectable-looking punchers gathered at the entrance to a restaurant. A Chinaman was bustling about inside, serving food to a bulky, gray-haired man, whose neatly trimmed Vandyke beard gave him a distinguished touch.

Hart dismounted, tied his horse, and entered the place without showing any curiosity about the waiting cowboys. From farther uptown came the noise of exploding six-guns and the excited howls of angry men. But the Chinaman and the graybeard seemed not to hear it.

Sober-faced, unshaven, hungry from his long ride, Hart ordered coffee, beefsteak, potatoes, and then leaned back in the chair at the counter to enjoy a smoke.

"What's the row, John?" he asked the Chinaman.

"Ketchum lustla," grunted the

Oriental. "Him go to jail. Melican cowboy alee same try lynch-lynch."

Hart grinned. "Lynch-lynch," he said. "They want to kill him twice, eh?"

At this the gray-haired cattleman laughed. He smoothed his trim Vandyke and looked at Hart Baxter keenly. He saw a strangely different man than had faced Bull-neck. A bristle of black whiskers made Hart look years older. A slouch hat had replaced his usual big white Stetson. And he wore no guns.

"Yo're a stranger here, young man," said the old fellow. "I'm Norm Chittinger, manager of the Double Crescent Ranch. Judge Chittinger, my friends call me. I'm too old to fool around with crazy lynch-law parties, even when the victim is one of Bull Howland's gang. I hope they hang the hoss-stealin' skunk higher than Haman, though."

Hart Baxter looked up sharply. "Bull" Howland was undoubtedly Burt Howland, the killer who had stuck him up. He was riding Bull's black bronc. So Howland was really bad, an outlaw boss, with a crew of gunnies!

"If he's Bull Howland's pard, let them hang him," growled Hart. "My name is Hart Baxter. I'm right glad to know you. You see, I'm a bronc-buster, Judge Chittinger."

"We ain't needin' no hands, my boy," interrupted Chittinger. "Sorry. The rustlers have been stealing the Double Crescent blind. I almost gave away my last shipment of critters to keep them from being stolen."

Judge Chittinger was talkative. He went on and on, telling his troubles to the boomer cowboy. Hart ate slowly, letting his keen eyes take in everything. He watched the Chinese cook, the back door, the silent group of cowboys waiting outside, probably Judge Chittinger's Double Crescent hands. Evidently the judge was too respectable to let his peelers join in a riot.

A faint creaking sound drew Hart's eyes to a side door. He saw a whiskery face, a cocked gun aimed at Judge Chittinger! And without even thinking of the consequences he lowered the coffee cup from his lips and hurled it.

Br-r-rang! The hot coffee and the splintered cup struck a split second before that shot rang out.

Judge Chittinger whirled on the stool, a short gun appearing in his hand. The slugs from his weapon knocked splinters from the door panel.

There was an agonizing moan. A figure came plunging across the threshold, falling, smoking gun held in the right hand.

Like magic the restaurant was filled with armed cowboys. One of them jabbed a Colt in Hart Baxter's ribs. Others pounced upon the fallen ambusher, jerked away his guns, searched him.

"He's dead," said Judge Chittinger. "Take the carcass over to the undertakers and leave it there for the sheriff. And all of yuh stay out of that riot. I don't like gun fightin'."

Judge Chittinger blew smoke from the barrel of his gun, holstered it and grinned at Hart Baxter, who had been released.

"Can yuh throw a rope as accurate as yuh did that cup of coffee?" demanded the graybeard. "If so, I reckon the Double Crescent can use a bronc-skinner by the name of Hart Bax——"

Boom! A terrific blast suddenly rattled the windowpanes and knocked dishes from the restaurant shelves.

It was followed by an excited roar

of many voices. A one-eared Double Crescent cowboy came running in, shouting that the rioters had dynamited the jail and were making the sheriff prisoner.

"What's orders now, Judge Chittinger?" he asked.

"Stay out of it!" ordered Chittinger. "I offered to supply deputies for Sheriff Norcross. He didn't want any. It's too late now."

The Double Crescent cowboys fumed and fretted, anxious to go over to the scene of the trouble. But Chittinger kept them under control. The old fellow paced the floor, puffing on a lighted stogie. Suddenly he pointed the stogie at Hart Baxter.

"You," he burst out. "You ain't armed. And ain't known as my hand. Go over there. Find out what's happenin'. When they start off with the prisoner, let me know."

Mystified by Judge Chittinger's actions, Hart started to ask a question. Then changed his mind, hurried outside, mounted the black horse, and rode toward the surging mob. Dust from the explosion still hung in the air, faintly visible by the light of many torches. It was dark now. Night had settled over the mountain cow town.

No one paid any heed to the unarmed puncher who began to shove his way through the crowd.

Hart saw a tall, swarthy, black-haired youth being hoisted onto a claybank horse. A big white hat was clapped on the victim's head. His hands were tied behind him, and his legs fastened under the bronc's belly.

"Won't you listen to me?" burst out the prisoner. "I'm no outlaw. This is a frame-up. Them papers—the brandin' irons were planted on me. My name is——"

A huge, square-faced, shaggy-haired man grabbed the prisoner, clapped a hand over his mouth, and held him while two others forced a gag between the victim's lips.

Hart uttered a low oath. "Bull Howland!" he muttered, his eyes fixed on the blunt, evil features and dull-brown eyes of the bull-necked lyncher.

The man who held the prisoner was Bull-neck, the same fellow who had tried to murder Hart. Young Baxter at this moment was riding his horse.

A yell was on Hart's lips, but it went unuttered. He heard a cowpuncher address Bull Howland as "Nate Gregory," saw that the outlaw killer was respected under this alias. People seemed to know him.

"They wouldn't believe a stranger like me, if I told them," Hart reflected. "Evidently the Silver Falls folks don't know Bull on sight. And he's pulling a slick one on them. That kid prisoner is innercent like he claims. Judge Chittinger will want to know this."

Swinging his bronc around, Hart spurred the black out of the crowd.

The jail loomed in Hart's path. He started to go around it, then halted and popped out of the saddle and darted into the sheriff's office. Four starred men, hog-tied with lassos, rolled around on the floor. Hart cut the sheriff loose.

Sawed-off, runty Sheriff Norcross let out a bellow of rage and leaped to a table to get his guns.

"I'll stop this hangin' bee," growled the sheriff, "or know the reason why."

Hart grabbed the peewee lawman and hung on.

"Wait," he panted. "Bull Howland—the outlaw—he's out there. Probably got his gang with him. He'll shoot yuh down, if you show yourself. Take it easy. Bull has

framed up on that prisoner. He's up to something."

The horse-faced sheriff lifted his whiskered face and glared at Hart as if he thought the young cowboy had lost his senses.

"Bull Howland?" he burst out. "Are you crazy? He wouldn't dare come right into town."

"He's there, I tell you," said Hart sternly. "He tried to murder me in the mountains, killed my horse. So I ought to know him. I heard somebody call him Nate Gregory. We got to work fast and slick if we're going to stop this lynch-law murder and grab Bull."

Sheriff Norcross stopped and began cutting his deputies loose. All of them grabbed up their guns and held them, ready to cover Hart Baxter, who, dirty and trail-worn, certainly looked like a suspicious character.

"Listen, boys," said Norcross, "this ranny says that Nate Gregory is really Bull Howland. He thinks Bull's got his outlaw gang out there, ready to start a fight."

One of the deputies guffawed derisively. The others glared at Hart out of hostile eyes.

"It's a trick, sheriff," said the laughing deputy. "Better frisk this stranger. He looks plenty tough himself. Maybe he's an outlaw."

A gun was jabbed in Hart's stomach. He felt himself grabbed from behind. Rough hands explored his clothes. He heard a grunt of satisfaction when the sheriff found Bull Howland's letters. Then an explosive oath.

"Why this gent is Bull!" cried a deputy. "He's totin' letters addressed to him."

"And I'm ridin' Bull Howland's black horse," barked Hart. "Bull killed my bronc. I grabbed his. Found them letters in the saddlebags. Now will you believe me when I say I know Bull Howland when I see him? If I was an outlaw, would I be without guns?"

Runty Sheriff Norcross blinked rapidly. A look of bewilderment crossed his face.

"The kid's talk is square," he grumbled. "Turn loose of him, boys. Maybe Nate Gregory *is* really Bull. He answers that description. Square-faced, shaggy, brown-eyed. Double-gunned."

"But Nate's got papers provin' that he's the new Double Crescent manager, replacin' Judge Chittinger," put in one of the deputies. "You seen them papers yourself."

"He forged 'em," growled Hart Baxter. "He must have faked them papers, because I know he's a murderin' bandit."

Wild yells bursting from the crowd outside drew their attention. The mob was riding away with the prisoner. Some one was shouting for them to hurry to the hanging grove. Guns blasted volleys into the night air. Men were howling themselves hoarse, like a pack of wolves.

Hart Baxter grabbed up a filled gun belt and holsters and clamped the loaded weapons around his waist.

"Listen, sheriff," he said earnestly. "You stop that crowd for a minute with your guns. You can't hold them long. But maybe it'll give me a chance to grab the prisoner or nab Bull Howland."

Without waiting for an answer, Hart darted outside, mounted, and joined the milling, shouting throng. His black bronc edged quickly toward the bound prisoner.

III.

Suddenly from the jail a shout rang out: "Halt there! In the name of the law."

The sheriff and his deputies were crouched down behind a stone balustrade, covering the mob with rifles.

"Stop, or we'll start shootin'!" roared the sheriff. "Hand over my prisoner."

The startled lynchers fell apart, halting, uncertain what to do. Those rifles were menacing. Bull Howland was no longer there to lead them. He had vanished.

Knife in hand, Hart Baxter swung close to the prisoner. The blade flashed. The victim's wrists came free of the ropes. Hart's quirt, slapping against the claybank's rump, sent the horse lunging into the darkness of a thicket.

The young cowboy, following close behind the prisoner, heard a gun crack. A bullet whistled off a tree trunk close to his head. Then a volley of shots crashed through the foliage.

"Lead the way," growled Hart. "I'm a stranger here and don't know the trails."

"I'm a stranger, too," said the rescued prisoner, in a harsh, choked voice. A rope around his neck had hurt his throat. "Thanks for saving my hide. Come on! I hear them after us."

Riders were crashing through the chaparral in close pursuit. Hart, bending low to avoid tree limbs, heard the angry cries of the lynchers and his heart sank. The mob, knowing all the trails and roads, would find it easy to trap them, unless he figured out some trick.

He thought of Judge Chittinger and his crew of cowboys, and suddenly he took the lead over toward the restaurant, shouting for the dark-haired puncher to follow. Chittinger had struck him as fair and square. He would give this lynch-law victim a break.

Out into the open Hart raced with the claybank rider close behind him. No one expected this move. None saw them head straight toward the Double Crescent outfit.

"Hey, Judge Chittinger," yelled Hart Baxter. "It's me. Yore new hand. Don't fire on us. Surround us with your men and keep goin'. We don't want to tangle with that mob."

There was no time for Chittinger to wait or argue. Hart and the white-hatted stranger swung in among the Double Crescent riders and kept going. The judge's cowboys closed about them and kept pace.

Out onto the main road in the direction of the ranch they went at a gallop. It had all happened so quickly that no one had seen Chittinger's outfit swallow up the two fugitives.

Rioters raced past, but they only yelled when they recognized Chittinger and his cowboys. Not until they were safely out of town did Hart call a halt on a knoll, beneath wide-spreading live oak trees.

In the moonlight he got a better look at the rescued prisoner, and suddenly he understood why Bull had wanted to murder Hart. Wearing a white hat and mounted on a claybank horse just like Hart's slain bronc, this stranger strongly resembled young Baxter. Both had dark hair and black eyes.

"Bull mistook me for this feller," thought Hart Baxter. "I guess he'd been told to shoot a cowboy in a white hat ridin' a claybank horse. And when he seen me, he picked the wrong man."

Norm Chittinger, spurring close to Hart, motioned for him and the stranger to draw aside from the others.

"Now, what's the meaning of this crazy stunt?" burst out the gray-

whiskered ranch manager. "Yo're fired, Hart Baxter. I told you I wanted the Double Crescent kept out of the fight. And you've made us help a Bull Howland outlaw get away."

Chittinger glowered at the young prisoner, whose legs were still bound under his horse's belly.

"This puncher ain't one of Bull's men," said Hart. "Bull framed him for some reason. I seen him grab this jasper and gag him when he wanted to speak."

"Impossible!" snorted Chittinger. "Bull Howland in town! He wouldn't dare show himself."

"Folks think he's Nate Gregory, the new manager of the Double Crescent," declared Hart. "But the sheriff's wise."

The prisoner gave a startled exclamation. He started to say something, but Chittinger stopped him, and motioned him aside. They drew away from Hart Baxter, who had time to roll a smoke. The stranger and Chittinger talked long and earnestly. Hart couldn't hear a word they said.

When they came back, Chittinger clapped Hart on the back and grinned at him. The stranger shook Hart's hand.

"Good work, Baxter," said the rescued prisoner. "I reckon Mr. Chittinger won't fire you after this."

"Yo're fired again, hired again," chuckled Judge Chittinger. "You ride on with the other punchers, Hart. This gent and me want to have a long talk."

Swiftly the Double Crescent crew galloped along the wooded trail, with Chittinger and the rescued man following. Hart was puzzled and curious. What had the stranger told Judge Chittinger? Why all the secrecy?

A late supper, steaming hot, was awaiting the tired waddies in the big log dining room. Chittinger and the stranger ate in another room.

"They act like old friends," thought Hart. "It's something that newcomer told Chittinger. I wonder what it was."

Gray-bearded Norm Chittinger came personally to tell Hart that he would have to bed down in the smokehouse. The bunk house was full. The Double Crescent manager even went along with the young cowboy to show him the way, and sat around smoking with him, while Hart spread out his blankets.

"You done me a good turn to-day, son," said Chittinger, on leaving, "and I won't forget it."

It was dark inside the smokehouse. Hart could hear the roar of Crooked River falls close by. Even when the lights went out in the bunk house, he still stood in the doorway gazing into the night. He saw a posse of riders come tearing up, led by the sheriff.

Sheriff Norcross entered the big log ranch house. When he came out and rode away he didn't have the escaped prisoner.

Hart saw a figure crouched down behind a rock not fifty feet from him. It was a cowboy, on guard.

"They don't trust me," muttered Hart. "Got a spy on watch. I'll have a little fun with this guard."

Flattening to the ground, Hart wriggled across the threshold and out into the brush. Rising, he made his way swiftly toward the house.

He halted in a patch of pines and stood looking at the long, low ranch house. Through a lighted window he saw Chittinger bidding the stranger good night. Saw the door closed. Then the light in the stranger's room went out.

Hart was about to step into the open when he heard a boot grate on

gravel. Three men appeared, sneaking up on the house. Hart stared in amazement at the square face, the brutal features, and the long, shaggy hair of the leader of the skulkers. It was Bull-neck. Bull Howland, the outlaw.

Hart's sinewy hands clamped around gun butts, dragged Colts from the holsters, leveled them at the prowlers as he followed them. Bull stooped picked up a pebble, and tossed it against a window.

A shadowy figure came out of the house and joined Bull's crew. Hart saw in the moonlight that it was Judge Chittinger, and a low growl rumbled in his throat. A tangle of scrub oak covered with wild grape concealed Hart as he crept close.

"Did anybody see yuh come here, Bull?" demanded Chittinger.

"What's the difference?" rumbled Bull. "The jig's up. The sheriff knows I'm Bull Howland, not Nate Gregory. I've come to tell yuh that me and the boys are scootin'."

"Runnin' out on me!" jeered Chittinger. "So you've turned yaller?"

"I'm no fool," growled Bull. "When you lose yore job as manager, we cain't rustle no more Double Crescent stock. The sheriff and C. A. men are makin' it too tough. I'm leavin' when Nate Gregory arrives to take over."

Chittinger laughed softly.

"Nate Gregory ain't never goin' to take over the Double Crescent," he declared. "We'll see to that. Before the Eastern owners can send out another manager, we'll have all their stock and be rich."

Hart waited to hear no more. Suddenly the truth had dawned on him. Why hadn't he guessed it before? Now he knew why Bull had tried to kill him, thinking he was the stranger.

Silently the young black-haired cowboy crept out of the wild-grape arbor and darted toward the house. He found a door ajar, left that way by Chittinger, and entered. He counted the bedroom doors, halted, knocked on one.

"Hey, Mr. Gregory!" he called softly.

Almost instantly the door opened in his face. He found himself staring into the barrels of two six-guns. Behind the gun loomed the shadowy figure of the stranger.

"Yo're Nate Gregory, the new ranch manager," said Hart quickly. "The Eastern owners sent you here to replace Chittinger, and stop the rustling of their stock."

"Who told you that?" demanded Gregory. "I was keepin' it a secret. Chittinger thought we'd have a better chance of——"

"He thought he'd have a better chance to murder you," interrupted Hart sharply. "Chittinger's in cahoots with Bull Howland to rustle Double Crescent stock. They tried to murder me first—mistaking me for you. Then they tried the frame-up and lynching."

Hart broke off speaking. He heard the clatter of boots outside Gregory's window. Other men were coming in the back door.

"Here they come!" whispered Hart Baxter. "They're comin' to kill you. Slip out into the hall here with me and just watch what they do."

Nate Gregory, almost a double in height and looks for Hart, stepped to the side of the buckaroo and crouched down among some slickers and overcoats on a wall hanger out of sight.

There was a rush of booted feet. Nate's door was flung open. Guns blasted slugs into his bed, where he was supposed to be sleeping.

"Kill the snoopin' skunk!" roared

Bull Howland's deep voice. "Fill him with bullets."

"He's gone," cried Chittinger from outside Gregory's window.

At that moment, Nate Gregory opened fire. Instantly the room was filled with stabbing powder flashes, the deafening roar of exploding shells, the pungent odor of burning explosive.

Side by side, Hart and Nate charged at the skulkers, one of whom lay motionless on the floor. Hart fired point-blank at a shadowy shape. The outlaw thudded to the floor, still shooting.

Bull Howland flung himself through the open door into Nate's bedroom with Hart in close pursuit. Bull turned and fired. Hart blasted away at him. In the utter darkness both men missed.

Frantically Bull plunged through an open window and fell in a heap outside. "Don't shoot, Chittinger," he bellowed. "This is Bull! Help me. A whole posse has got me."

Norm Chittinger did not answer. He was racing toward the group of horses that the outlaws had left tied. Bull saw Chittinger rise to the saddle, and he yelled at the treacherous ranch manager again.

"Don't take my horse!" bellowed Bull Howland.

Hart saw Bull lift his gun and fire at Chittinger. He saw the graybeard topple out of the saddle. Then he felt himself knocked flat. A bullet burned through his shoulder.

Stunned, shaken, he struggled to his feet and fired at Bull Howland. Like a snarling animal at bay, Bull wheeled around and charged straight at the wounded cowboy. There in the moonlight they shot it out. Hart had to grit his teeth and use all his will power to keep erect.

He scarcely heard Nate Gregory's triumphant shout, telling him that the new ranch manager had licked the other outlaws. He barely made out the excited yells of the men down at the bunk house and Nate Gregory's shouted explanations.

His whole mind was centered on those slivers of flame darting at him from Bull's gun muzzles. He aimed at the flashes and pulled trigger. He felt a mild surprise when he saw Bull pitch forward on his face and lie still.

The surprised look was still with him when Nate Gregory and a party of loyal cowboys picked him up, carried him inside, and laid him out on a table.

"Good work, Baxter," cried Nate Gregory. "You saved the day. You ain't hurt bad. In a month you'll be on your feet, drawin' down a foreman's pay on the Double Crescent."

Mix-up In Mescalero

A "Shorty Masters" Story

By Allan R. Bosworth

Author of "Wild Hosses And Bad Men," etc.

EYES peeled for trouble, quick hand ready to sweep his six-gun into flaming action, the "Sonora Kid" rode warily and alone down the main street of the little cow town.

Not once did the tall waddy look back toward the mule-drawn freight outfit that rumbled along a quarter of a mile behind him. For the first time in many months, he and his sawed-off pard, "Shorty" Masters, M. D. (Mule Driver), were traveling separately.

Mescalero appeared quiet enough at siesta time. Vine-shaded adobes sprawled back from the dusty street, and horses dozed at the hitch racks. But there was mystery in the air, and the strange expectancy of roaring guns and hot, blue wisps of powder smoke drifting down the wind that rustled the cottonwoods.

The Sonora Kid, whose real name of Willie Wetherbee was almost forgotten, made out the sign on the low structure that adjoined the Buckhorn Saloon. It said: "Express and Stage Office," and the tall rider headed in that direction.

"Tumbleweed," he told his sorrel mustang, "mebbe I'm leavin' yuh here fer a spell. Mebbe I'll have to ride the stage out o' Mescalero. Find out purty soon."

He swung to the ground in front of the saloon, tied Tumbleweed at the rail, and jingled his spurs into the coolness of the Buckhorn.

Four men who were bellied up to

the bar turned quickly as the cowboy entered. He caught a swift glimpse of swarthy, evil faces, noted the ragged scar that ripped down the cheek of the squat hombre nearest the door, and kept on going until he reached the entrance to the back room.

Stepping inside this, he closed the door behind him, and then leaned against it, listening intently.

"Who was that hombre?" a voice asked at the bar.

"Never seen him before," the bartender answered. "Why?"

"Jest wondered. Fill 'em up again."

The Sonora Kid smiled and turned to a table that stood against the wall. He sat down in a chair that faced the barroom and afforded him a view of the back door. Then he lifted his .45 from its holster and rapped three times on the wall with the butt of the gun.

Three answering raps came almost immediately. A minute later, the back door opened and admitted a burly, bald-headed man in shirt sleeves.

"Howdy, Griffin!" drawled the tall waddy as the newcomer took a seat at the table. "Well, we're here. Now what's all the mystery about?"

Griffin mopped his brow with a bandanna and leaned across the table.

"Where's yore pard?" he asked.

"Drove on to the feed yard, like yuh said in the letter. He'll be up here in a few minutes."

"That's good!" Griffin drummed the top of the table with nervous fingers. "Anybody at the bar when yuh came through?"

"Four men—tough-lookin' buzzards. One sawed-off hombre with a scar down his cheek, and——"

"Thought so! That's Gotch Barton—one of Matt Gillis's gang! They're watchin' every move we make at the express office. They know the dinero is coming through. And in the meantime, the sheriff and both his deputies are out lookin' fer Gillis himself."

"Dinero?" asked Wetherbee. "Yuh mean yuh want Shorty to haul money somewhere?"

The express agent leaned even closer. "Twenty thousand dollars," he said in a low tone. "To the railroad bridge construction camp down at Vinegarroon. Pay-roll money."

The Sonora Kid nodded. "But why don't yuh send it on the stage? Hosses is faster than mules, and yuh got a guard on the stage."

"Stage has been held up twice lately," Griffin said. "Both times, the driver—Joe Akers—forked over. I ain't sayin' they didn't have the drop on him and Pierce Scott, the guard. But the company is suspicious. They figger mebbe they're in cahoots with Gillis and his gang. Matt Gillis held up the train down near Paisano last week, and got shot in the leg. He's holed up somewhere, and he knows about this big pay roll. We got to trick him some way—and it's all figgered out. I'll tell yuh when yore pard comes. In the meantime——"

The meantime was crowded with loud and furious action from the front room. A heavy body thudded against the floor, glass crashed behind the bar, and then——

Braang! A gun roared.

The Sonora Kid sprang to his feet and swept his .45 from its holster as he leaped to kick open the barroom door.

Braang! A heavy slug ripped splinters from the wall near his face.

He ducked and came up shooting. Out of the corner of his eye he saw Shorty Masters backing behind an overturned table across from the

bar, saw the scar-faced man picking himself out of the sawdust with a dazed expression on his unshaven face.

Braang! One of the other three men wilted, grabbed the bar for support, and staggered toward the door.

A companion slammed a last shot in the direction of the mule driver, and then bolted out the front door. As the screen slammed, the bartender, his usually red face a sickly white, bobbed up from behind the mahogany.

"Cut that out!" he yelled. "Yuh can't shoot up this place!"

Br-room! Crash! A bullet shattered two bottles on the shelf back of him.

He vanished again, and then, as the scarred man and the hombre Wetherbee had wounded made the door together, the fight was all over.

Hoofs clattered down the street. Shorty holstered his gun and grinned as he strode toward his tall sidekick.

"Say, yuh got a lot o' nerve, always talkin' about *me* runnin' into trouble!" reproached the Sonora Kid. "What happened?"

The mule-skinner rubbed bruised knuckles. "I stepped up to the bar and ordered some lemonade," he said. "First, the highbinder with the scar made some remark about a sissy, then he said somethin' about mule drivers bein' lower than sheepherders, and then I busted him on the jaw—and the shootin' started. Never seen him before."

"Well, yuh may see him again!" retorted Willie. "That's Gotch Barton, one of the Gillis gang. Come on in here and let Griffin tell yuh what this is all about!"

The express agent was mopping his brow again as he stood near the back door. He came back to the table and shook hands with Shorty.

"Yuh went to the wagon yard?" he asked cautiously.

"Yep." Shorty nodded. "One of the Sextet is about to lose a shoe. Got to have it——"

"One of *what?*" Griffin asked, mystified.

The Sonora Kid chuckled. "Yuh wouldn't understand," he drawled gently. "Them six mules Shorty drives are all children of the same mare. Her name was Lucy. So Shorty calls the team the 'Sextet from Lucia.' He's plumb loco about highfalutin music. The mules have got names that would git the Humane Society all riled up—like Chopin, and Beethoven, and Tsch—Tsch——"

"Tschaikowsky!" Shorty supplied. "But Chopin is the one that's goin' to be lame if I don't git busy an' git that shoe——"

"No time now!" Griffin broke in hurriedly. "Yuh got to be movin'. Here's the plan—we got two money boxes, exactly alike. The one with the twenty thousand dollars in it is bein' put into yore wagons right now by a couple of my men, down at the wagon yard. The other——"

"Twenty thousand dollars?" Shorty exclaimed.

"The other," Griffin went on, "is filled with washers and waste paper. It'll be put on the stage, which is due here in a little over an hour. Nobody knows but you that you're haulin' anything—and much less that it's the real money box. Savvy?"

The partners nodded. Griffin got to his feet. "There ain't any time to lose," he warned. "Turn the box over to the office at Vinegarroon as soon as yuh git there. I've got to go back next door—left the office alone and——"

The door from the barroom slammed an interruption. A heavy-

set, red-faced man who carried a traveling salesman's sample case entered.

He walked toward them with a limp, and spoke jerkily as he put the sample case down:

"Who's the express agent? Bartender said I might find you here. What time's the stage—stage to Vinegarroon? Have to be there tonight. Important. Can't——"

Griffin frowned. "Stage leaves in a little more'n an hour, stranger," he said. "But if I was you, I'd wait!"

The red-faced man bit off almost half of a cigar. "Can't!" he exploded. "Got to be there. Why wait?"

Griffin shrugged. "All right. I jest thought—thought mebbe th' stage would be crowded."

"Ride on top if necessary. Be back in an hour!"

He picked up the sample case and limped back into the saloon. The express agent shook his head.

"Somebody might git hurt!" he said. "Well, yuh better be hittin' the trail! The stage will pass yuh somewhere along the line. Adios, and good luck!"

II.

Five miles down the old Mescalero Trail, winding deeper into the wild upheaval of the Big Bend, Chopin cast his shoe.

Shorty Masters heard the *ping* of steel on the rocky road, and saw the black lead mule stumble as the shoe dragged and came loose. Grumbling under his breath because he had not insisted that the shoe be repaired in town, the bow-legged freighter jerked rein and whistled to his pard.

The Sonora Kid came riding back up the road that twisted through cedar and live oak and slanted down toward the cool depths of a canyon. Shorty descended and inspected Chopin's right rear hoof.

"Got to fix it now!" he announced. "Half a mile on this kind o' road, and he'd be havin' to use crutches. And Chopin never did like blacksmith work!"

Wetherbee swung from his saddle. "Ain't no place to turn off for quite a ways," he informed Shorty. "You'll have to fix it right here."

"I'll take him out of th' traces and do the job right down there under the big cedar," Shorty answered. "If I left him in the harness, he'd act up, and mebbe kick Rubinstein's teeth out or lame him. Have to hurry, too, or the stage will come along and find the road blocked."

He unhooked the trace chain and led the black mule down to the shady spot. The Sonora Kid climbed into the wagon and appeared again carrying the heavy box with a padlock on its lid.

"I ain't leavin' this alone fer even five minutes!" he drawled. "Twenty thousand dollars would take too long to pay back, if somebody sneaked up and swiped it. Here, yuh can set on it. Have to heat the shoe?"

Shorty made a hasty inspection. "Nope—jest use some new nails and then do some manicurin' with the rasp. Whoa, yuh black hunk o' dynamite!"

Chopin reared and snorted. The cowboy stationed himself at the head of the mule and held tightly on the halter strap.

"Go ahead!" he said to Shorty. "You're on th' business end o' this here job!"

The freighter lifted the mule's leg cautiously and began hammering.

"Shucks!" he declared. "This ain't dangerous."

"You're sweatin' kind o' free," Wetherbee observed.

"Well, it's hot work. But yuh take a mule—now, *he* knows and appreciates when yuh are tryin' to help him. Smarter than a hoss. For instance, when a mule gits caught in bob wire, he's got sense enough to stand still—— *Stand still,* yuh lop-sided jackass! Jest one more nail, now! A hoss gits all excited and cuts hisself——"

Wham! Chopin's kick was a jolt of dynamite, pure and unadulterated.

Shorty went sprawling into the edge of a pricky pear, ten feet away. There was a rending, tearing crash as the mule let go again—with both hoofs, this time.

"Gosh!" yelled the Sonora Kid. "He's busted the money box!"

Shorty scrambled to his feet, spat out a mouthful of dirt, and tenderly plucked a cactus thorn from the region of his floating rib. The damage done, Chopin was standing meekly.

"I'll bust him!" vowed the freighter. "Look what he nearly done to me! I told yuh he hated blacksmithin' work, and——"

"Look!" howled the tall puncher. "*Look!*"

Shorty leaped toward the strong box, his injuries forgotten. Spilled on the ground, where the heavy lid was wrenched loose from one hinge and the padlock, was a pile of iron washers and some canceled bills!

"Yuh call that twenty thousand dollars?" demanded Willie, his usually soft drawl going shrill with excitement. "What is this—a joke?"

"No!" Shorty shook his head. His jaw sagged, and then clicked shut with determination. "Nope, it ain't a joke. It's a mistake! Them expressmen got the boxes mixed up. And now we've got to hold up the stage!"

Wetherbee stared. "Hold up the stage?" he gasped.

"Yep! That's where the real dinero is. Griffin thinks Akers and Scott are in cahoots with the Gillis gang. So we've got to beat the Gillis gang to the dinero!"

The Sonora Kid was already going into action. He grabbed Chopin's halter again.

"How about the shoe? Will it hold fer a few miles?"

"It'll have to!" Shorty said grimly. He pulled another cactus spine out of his neck. "I was practically through when he cut loose. Mebbe a hossfly stung him. Come on, we'll have to move on down the hill and git the waggins off the road!"

"Well, I thought yuh couldn't fool a hossfly!" chuckled the Sonora Kid. "I'm goin' to put this box back in the waggin. Here, le' me have that hammer. We may need to prove somethin' with it. Holdin' up stages is considered a crime in some parts o' Texas!"

Shorty led the mule back to the road and replaced it in the traces while his pard hammered the money box into some semblance of its former shape. After he had hoisted the box into the wagon again, Willie forked Tumbleweed and loosened his gun in its holster.

"Easy on that!" Shorty warned, climbing to the driver's seat. "Build yoreself a loop in yore reata, instead. Best way to handle this will be fer yuh to pile the twine on both the driver and the guard at one throw. Yank 'em off the seat, but don't hurt 'em too much. I'll have 'em covered before they can git up. Mebbe Griffin's suspicion is all wrong!"

"Yeah, and mebbe there ain't no twenty thousand dollars!" grumbled Wetherbee. "Let's go. I'll find a place where yuh can hide three waggins and six mules!"

He scouted ahead on Tumbleweed.

Shorty groaned to himself as he sent the heavy wagons rolling after his pard. They were taking a desperate chance; if Griffin's suspicions had been reasonably well founded, the stage driver and the guard certainly would have been replaced.

"Good thing Willie is jest as good with a rope as he is with his gun!" the freighter muttered. "Otherwise, there might be shootin'. And I ain't anxious to plug an innocent man!"

Another quarter of a mile, and the Sonora Kid rode off the trail to the left. He reappeared in a minute and waved Shorty to a halt. The freighter looked over the canyon rim. Down to the right, he could see the road winding a mile farther on.

"This here's the spot!" Willie called. "Pull them waggins out there and tell yore musical mules to keep quiet. I'll set Tumbleweed right here. I can rope better from a hoss!"

He indicated a growth of cedar that sprouted from a cluster of boulders. Anybody coming down the road would be unable to see him until they were at the very spot. Shorty nodded approvingly.

"Yuh better rope plumb perfect!" he warned. "And what's more, yuh better tie that bandanna up over yore face. This here has got to look like a real holdup!"

He sawed on the reins, cut the Sextet expertly between boulders and a wind-twisted cedar tree, and ran the wagons into a small box canyon that was screened by brush. Then he hurried back to join his pard.

The Sonora Kid's hat was low over his eyes; the bandanna covered his chin and nose. Shorty chuckled.

"Yuh look tough enough to be Matt Gillis hisself!" he declared. "By the way, I wonder what that hombre looks like? Ain't ever noticed his picture on them reward posters."

"He's got a bullet in his laig, right now, accordin' to Griffin!" Willie answered. "Which would be the most distinguishin' mark he—— Say!"

"Say what?" Shorty asked. "Oh, I know! That hombre with the limp! We're a couple o' sheep-herders fer not thinkin' o' that at the time. I'll bet yuh that's Gillis, ridin' th' stage, and goin' to meet his men somewhere, and——"

Wetherbee jerked upright in his saddle and lifted his hand. "I reckon you'll know purty soon!" he drawled coolly. "Here she comes, rockin' and rollin'!"

The mule-skinner sprang to the other side of the road and lifted his bandanna to cover his face as Wetherbee had done. Then he drew his gun and waited, crouching behind a boulder.

Above them, echoing across the wild canyon, came the clatter of hoofs and the rattle of wheels as the treasure-laden stagecoach rolled down the Mescalero Trail.

III.

The stage was coming fast. If the Sonora Kid missed one cast with the reata, there'd be no chance for a second try. Shorty determined on desperate measures. He had to draw the attention of the guard and the driver first.

Dust swirled down upon them. The freighter peered cautiously up the road. Four horses, slowing from a gallop as the grade grew steeper. Two men, perched atop the swaying vehicle, one with a rifle across his lap and a six-gun strapped around his middle. Joe Akers and Pierce Scott, suspected of being allies of the Gillis gang.

Shorty gathered his muscles for a leap. The stage was only a few yards away, now. With a wild yell, the bow-legged freighter sprang into the road.

Braang! A bullet fanned his cheek.

He yelled again and cracked down under the flaring nostrils of the frightened lead horses. They shied, and wheels squealed on the gravel as the coach careened dangerously.

Br-room!

"Stick 'em up!" bellowed Shorty at the top of leather-lined lungs.

Pierce Scott ripped out an oath that was lost in the din of pounding hoofs and grinding wheels. His .30-30 belched flame again, daggering the curtain of alkali dust, down toward the sawed-off highwayman with the smoking gun.

Swish!

From the other side of the road a slender loop snaked out and dropped, true to the mark. It settled over the taut shoulders of Akers and Scott as they crouched low and expected hot lead to rip into their boddies. It jerked tight as the stage kept going.

There was a startled yell from the two men—a yell that was cut short into a choking, strangled gasp. They were lifted suddenly from the top of the coach, jerked sidewise over the wheels.

Scott's rifle fell on the side where Shorty Masters stood, struck against a whirling hub, and discharged in the air. The two men hit the ground on the other side, with stunning force.

Reins dragging, the four-horse team slowed and stopped a few yards farther, their path blocked as they swung and straddled the rocks at the left of the trail.

A quick glance showed Shorty that Akers and Scott were temporarily out of the fighting. Jamming his .45 back into its holster, he sprinted after the coach and reached its side just as the door jerked open.

Out popped the red-faced man who had limped into the back room of the Buckhorn Saloon, his mouth forming incoherent, excited sounds, his left hand reaching inside his coat, toward his armpit.

Crash! For the second time that day, Shorty's right fist swung in a smashing uppercut.

It struck flush against the man's jaw and snapped his head back. The passenger folded, sat down in the door of the coach, and then toppled gently to smear his face in the dust.

Grabbing him, Shorty ran his hand inside the coat and found an armpit holster that held a .45. He jammed this into the waistband of his corduroys, and ran back to where Wetherbee was bending over the driver and guard.

The tall cowboy straightened and pulled down his bandanna mask to show the suspicion of a grin.

"They ain't bad hurt!" he drawled. "Jest knocked their heads together when they fell. Where's the other hombre?"

Shorty jerked his thumb. "He's in the same fix. Look—th' best thing we can do is switch the boxes, put 'em back on the stage, and start the hosses. They'll come to and either figger that we was scared away or that we found out they was jest haulin' washers—if they look in the box! Hurry!"

Akers was a heavy man. It took the combined strength of the two pards to boost him to the high seat on the stagecoach. His head sagged limply on his shoulders, and he groaned once as they hoisted the lighter Scott to his side. Wetherbee found a piece of light rope kept for tying baggage on the coach, and se-

cured it over the laps of the two unconscious men.

Then they crammed the passenger back inside the stage. Shorty studied his face closely.

"He don't look like an outlaw!" muttered the freighter. "Still, yuh cain't tell. I reckon we wouldn't want to take him in to the sheriff jest because he's got a limp, and we ain't got time to look and see if he's been shot in the laig! Git the box, and let 'em go!"

The mule-skinner brought the battered money box from his own wagons, while Wetherbee unloaded the twin to it from the stage. The switch made, Shorty tied the reins loosely to the rope across the driver's lap, and dusted his hat on the flank of the right-hand lead horse.

The team started off down the road in a high trot, and the pards watched the stage vanish around the bend.

"Not many places where they could git off the road," Shorty declared. "Whew! I'm glad that job is over. All we got to do now is hide the dinero in the waggins and move on. If Gillis meets the stage, he's goin' to be surprised—whether Akers and Scott are in cahoots with him or not!"

"And if that's Matt Gillis in the back seat, he's goin' to be surprised when he comes to!" chuckled Wetherbee. "That was the first stage I ever helped hold up, and I reckon it'll be the last. Twenty thousand dollars ain't—— Listen!"

Shorty was already listening. Grabbing his pard's arm, he jerked the Sonora Kid toward the boulders at the side of the road.

There was another horse on the road above them—coming at a gallop!

Tense and ready, the pair waited. It was a big, deep-chested roan that flashed into view on the trail, and the man astride him was coatless and bald-headed.

"Griffin!" exclaimed Shorty. "He's jest found out about the mistake. Hey! This is as far as yuh go!"

The express agent grabbed for his hip, and then recognized the two men who had leaped into the road. He flung himself off the horse and ran toward them, blowing hard.

"Mistake!" he shouted. "Terrible mistake! I——"

Shorty grinned. "Yeah, we know! Yuh got things messed up in a swell way! There was some kind o' mix-up in Mescalero, and yuh put the dinero on the stage. But we got it straightened out!"

Griffin stared and mopped his glistening head. "How?" he panted. "What happened to the stage?"

Shorty held up his hand. "Listen, yuh can hear it root-tootin' down the road. But the money ain't on it. We held it up!"

"Held it up?" gasped the express agent. "Was there any shootin'? What happened? Did the passenger——"

"Aw, he wasn't hurt much!" the Sonora Kid broke in. "There was a little gun play, and Shorty popped him on the jaw. Did it occur to yuh that that hombre with th' limp might be Matt Gillis, and——"

"Matt Gillis?" Griffin's voice climbed to a shriek. "Matt Gillis? Read this here telegram!"

He jerked a yellow slip of paper from his trousers pocket and waved it under Shorty's nose. Then, as the freighter took the message, Griffin sat down on a boulder and groaned.

Shorty read aloud:

"SOLOMON DREW VICE PRESIDENT CHARGE CONSTRUCTION COMING THROUGH EN ROUTE INSPECT VINEGARROON BRIDGE STOP TAKE STAGE THURSDAY AT MES-

CALERO STOP MAKE HIM COMFORTABLE STOP SUFFERS FROM GOUT AND EXTREME NERVOUSNESS WILLIAM LAWSON SUPERINTENDENT"

A groan from Griffin, louder and longer than the previous one, broke the strained silence. Shorty fingered the .45 in his waistband.

"Well," he drawled, "I might've figgered any hombre that would tote a gun up over his ribs wasn't an outlaw. But yuh see——"

"I see where I'm fired, and probably Lawson, too!" moaned Griffin. "Lawson is the one that got the boxes mixed, I reckon. He didn't mark 'em plain enough. I never saw that money. He jest sent me the boxes on the train from Stockton, and wrote out the instructions. One of 'em was marked with chalk! If they ever do git this railroad line built through from Vinegarroon to Mescalero, it won't be because——"

He broke off suddenly and leaped to his feet. The three men stared at each other wordlessly for a few tense seconds.

Braang! Bang! Br-room! Six-guns cracked below them, echoed like thunderclaps from the rocky cliffs of the canyon, and rolled up on the still air. Intermingled with the shots were wild yells.

The Sonora Kid whirled toward his horse.

"That wasn't the only mix-up, I reckon!" he shouted. "They've met Matt Gillis!"

IV.

Shorty Masters thrust Solomon Drew's Colt deeper into the band of his trousers and sprinted toward his wagons.

"Hit the saddle!" he yelled over his shoulder. "I'll ride Chopin! It ain't very far!"

Br-rang! Bang! No, it wasn't far, when the shots sounded like that.

A bullet screamed from a rock and sounded as if it came almost to the spot where the Sonora Kid was springing into his saddle. Griffin ran to his horse and nearly bowled the animal over as he climbed aboard.

"They'll kill Solomon Drew!" he stuttered. "We'll all be fired!"

"Come on!" the Sonora Kid ordered. "It sounds like they're meetin' up with a little difficulty in killin' anybody!"

He hit spurs to Tumbleweed and shot past Shorty as the freighter slung harness off the black mule. Leaving the halter and collar on Chopin, the teamster vaulted astride and kicked boot heels into the mule's flanks. Chopin responded with a burst of speed that would have done credit to most horses.

Tumbleweed and the big roan vanished around the bend where the road dropped among cedars and live oaks toward the canyon bed. Shorty set his jaw hard and sent Chopin plunging over the steep bank, trusting in the sure-footedness of the mule to take a short cut.

A straggling volley rolled up to his ears. Whoever had attacked the dazed men on the stagecoach, they had encountered surprising resistance. A lot of gunpowder was being burned down there behind the screen of trees.

Braang! Boom! Br-raang!

"Git goin'!" Shorty yelled, leaning low over the mule's neck to avoid being scratched from his back by overhanging limbs. "And don't take a notion to cast a shoe now, or yuh will go on barefoot!"

"Yip-eeee! Stay with 'em!" A wild yell that would have startled a Comanche told Shorty that the straight-shooting Sonora Kid had

reached the scene of battle—and now another gun was popping.

He kicked Chopin into a final burst of speed and broke through a live-oak thicket.

There, in a narrow pass where the road wound into the canyon bed, the stagecoach stood with its squealing, frightened team swung almost crosswise in the road and facing the blank canyon wall. And crouching low on the seat, blazing away with six-guns at the live-oak thicket that bordered the road where it widened just beyond the pass, were Joe Akers and Pierce Scott.

Chopin made the road again. Shorty saw Tumbleweed flash out from the other side of the stage, brush the noses of the stage-team leaders, and pound like a streak of crimson fury into the bottleneck of the pass. The Sonora Kid was lying, Indian fashion, almost under the neck of his horse, slinging hot lead at the outlaws.

The flame from roaring guns licked vividly out of the gloom of trees and high canyon walls. A bullet burned across the mule-skinner's shoulders. He caught sight of a vague shape in the edge of the thicket.

His gun whipped up and kicked under the recoil of a blasting shot. A man pitched from his saddle and threshed the dry leaves with arms and legs.

"Stop, yuh dawg-gone fool!" Shorty yelled at his hot-headed pard, but the Sonora Kid kept going with lead singing around him and the sorrel cayuse.

Griffin came pounding up, the big roan making enough noise for a whole troop of cavalry. Between the two and the shots from the stagecoach, enough lead was hammered into the thicket to disconcert the outlaws. Willie Wetherbee made it safely through the bottleneck and leaped to the ground on the other side.

Now the tall cowboy was behind a boulder, catching the Gillis gang with fire from a murderous cross angle. Shorty sprang from the back of the mule and crouched beside the stagecoach, with Griffin taking doubtful shelter behind a wheel.

The two men on top scrambled to the ground. Akers's right arm hung limply, and he was forced to hold his gun under his armpit while he reloaded.

"Rush 'em!" shouted a harsh voice from the shadows. "Twenty thousand dollars, an' yuh are holdin' back! Come on, clean 'em up!"

A chorus of yells greeted the order. Into the open came a squat man with long arms. In the gloom the scar on his face was like a dark smudge. He slammed a shot into the dirt two feet from where Shorty knelt, and the freighter triggered just as the Sonora Kid's gun spat flame from the boulder.

"Gotch" Barton fell with two slugs in his body and a gasping, gurgling scream on his lips.

The other hesitated. Matt Gillis yelled again—yelled harsh oaths that brought snarling response. The outlaw leader himself took the lead. He came out of the thicket, not limping, as Shorty expected, but charging on a wiry bay cayuse and emptying bullets from twin six-guns.

Now his men rallied to the charge. There were six—seven—nine of them who poured out of the shadows and attacked. Three on horseback, the others afoot.

Braang! Bang! Gunshots rolled together, spilling thunder up over the rim of the canyon on the Mescalero Trail. Bullets hammered off steel tires, sang from rocks, bit

chunks of wood from the wheel spokes.

Out of the window of the stagecoach, a new gun began to blaze. Shorty Masters ripped the railroad official's weapon from his waistband and cracked down with both hands.

Matt Gillis's horse went down with a scream that was almost human. Shorty shuddered. He saw the outlaw leader thrown clear, saw him lurch to his feet and sway toward him. The gun in the freighter's right hand clicked on an empty shell, and there was no time to reload.

Braang! Dirt flew into his face.

Gillis was coming on. Shorty lurched to his feet and triggered with the other gun. Half blinded as he was, the shot missed, and then the hammer fell on a fired cartridge.

Two—three of the outlaws were down. Griffin rolled over under the stage and lay quietly. The Sonora Kid came out of his shelter and closed in behind the bandits, firing coolly. Gillis came on, limping, swaying, a tall, stoop-shouldered man with an undershot jaw and murderous slits for eyes.

The mule-skinner drew back his right hand and threw his heavy .45 just as Matt Gillis brought his right-hand gun up for the kill.

Crash! The hurtling weapon caught the bandit's upflung arm, knocked the gun out of his hand, and threw him off balance.

He lurched sidewise, put too much weight on his wounded leg, and collapsed with a howl of pain at the side of the road.

There was a snort and another crash. Matt Gillis rolled limply out of the shadows and spreadeagled in the trail, face down in the dust. Two of the mounted outlaws broke through and hammered up the canyon. The three who remained threw down their guns and yelled surrender.

Quiet fell over the canyon where blue gun smoke was still drifting. The Sonora Kid closed in and marched the trio against the rocky wall of the cliff. The stage door opened, and Solomon Drew limped out.

"What's all this? Who are these people? I've got to get to Vinegarroon. See here, driver, is this——"

"Wait a minute!" Shorty interrupted. "I busted yuh in the jaw once by mistake, but I'll do it on purpose the next time! The money's safe, if that's what you're afraid of. But Griffin's hurt!"

Drew lapsed into nervous, shocked silence. The teamster knelt by the side of the coach and pulled Griffin out. The bald-headed man sat up, shook his head and opened his eyes. There was a welt high on his polished dome where a flattened slug had struck after it glanced from the tire.

"I'm all right!" he muttered. "But I'll be fired as shore——"

"Yuh won't be anything of the kind!" Shorty declared. "Drew don't know yuh went to all the trouble to save the twenty thousand dollars. Furthermore, the railroad ought to be ashamed, suspectin' Akers and Scott, and causin' us to rope 'em off the——"

"Say!" bellowed Akers, stepping out with his one good arm raised. "Are you the buzzard that done that?"

"Take it easy, Joe!" Griffin warned. "We had orders to watch yuh. The box yuh carried wasn't supposed to have money in it at all. Shorty and the Sonora Kid was to tote the money, and when it was put on the stage by mistake, they done right in holdin' yuh up!"

Pierce Scott crowded in, sputter-

ing. "Yeah, and they dang near busted our necks! And I lost my Winchester! If we hadn't had a couple o' .45s here under the seat, we'd have been in a fine mess! And I want to tell yuh I would have jumped off and let 'em have the dinero, there was so many of 'em! But we was tied on, and couldn't jump! We was jest comin' to when they attacked the stage!"

"Just a minute! Just a minute!"

It was Solomon Drew, limping nervously about, waving his hands. He eyed each of the men in turn. Griffin looked down and dug his boot toes into the ground. Drew stopped in front of the express agent.

"Don't worry," he said. "About the job, I mean. You'll keep it. Everybody'll keep it. Their jobs. I'd like to hire this man. This short man. He hit me so hard I didn't come to until the fight was half over. But forget that. He thought he had to do it to get the money. But he hasn't got the money."

Shorty gasped. "What? You're loco! It's up there in my waggins."

"That's what *you* think! I took a hand in this, young man. When I found out about the robbery plot, I decided not to trust it to anybody but myself. *Both* those boxes contain junk. Yes, sir, washers!"

"Then where is the *dinero?*" Griffin, Akers, Shorty, and the Sonora Kid asked together.

Solomon Drew smiled and pointed inside the coach. "In that sample case. Twenty thousand dollars, extra shirt, extra gun in it. Let's go. Got to get to Vinegarroon to-night!"

The Sonora Kid was the first to recover. "What I want to know," he drawled, "is what happened to Matt Gillis. Last I seen of him, he was about to plug Shorty. Next thing I knowed, he was spread out in the road. I know nobody shot him, because that was what *I* was aimin' to do, and I was watchin'!"

Shorty chuckled. "He rolled over there and bumped into Chopin's hind laigs!" he explained. "As yuh remarked earlier to-day, that's the business end of a mule! I reckon we can take what's left o' Gillis back to town and turn him over to the sheriff with these other hombres!"

THE BANDITS RETURNED THE CATTLE

Captain McNelly had disposed of a band of rustlers who were stealing cattle in Texas and delivering them to a Mexican army officer, General Cortinas. The general had boasted that Americans were welcome to come and raid his herds, and would be free to remove all the stock they could get back across the river.

After the defeat of his rustlers, which broke the backbone of the bandit hordes, Cortinas promised that the stolen cattle should be returned.

McNelly, with ten of his Rangers, was punted across the river to meet the custom guards. The chief customs man said the cattle could not be released until customs duty was paid, at which Captain McNelly covered him with every rifle in his command.

Keeping his guns trained on the chief, McNelly forced the bandits to swim every head of the stolen critters back across the river.

A week later, they were all delivered to the brand owners. This was the first official recovery of stolen stock that was made during all the years of the bandit activities.

Sonny Tabor At Broken Gun Ranch

By Ward M. Stevens

Author of "Kid Wolf in the Forest of Fear," etc.

CHAPTER I.

SELF-DEFENSE—PLUS!

RIDING leisurely toward the long adobe ranch house that was basking so peacefully in the warm morning sunshine, "Sonny" Tabor, astride his black-and-white-spotted little bronc, didn't know that he was headed right straight into trouble. He didn't dream that in a very few moments, the calm of the sunlit valley would be broken by the roar of gunfire. Yet every frisking, waltzing step that Paint took was bringing him just that much closer to disaster.

Sonny Tabor was usually very much on the alert. For he was a "wanted" man, in spite of his youthful years an outlaw with a dead-or-alive price on his head and hunted by every sheriff and peace officer in the Territory of Arizona. Day or night, unless he wanted to be captured or ruthlessly killed, he had to be on his guard. For Sonny, Death lurked everywhere.

But the layout he was approaching looked innocent. Just the day before, he had succeeded in passing by the county-seat town of Warbow without attracting suspicion, and he was in a cheerful frame of mind. He was sure that he was not being trailed, confident that nobody on this little spread would recognize him as a fugitive. If some one did

—well, in that case, he'd just have to take care of himself! He'd done it before.

"We might even be able to find a job here, Paint, to tide us over for a few days," he said half aloud as he drummed in.

During his restless wanderings over the Southwest, Sonny had seen many a ranch house such as this. Two long walls of the same plastered adobe formed wings at either end, thus making the fourth side of a horse corral. A closely woven wall of ocotillo made a fence that obscured his view of the front to some extent, and as he drew up, he saw a slim young hombre of about his own age striding toward him.

"Howdy," Sonny greeted in a friendly voice.

Nobody would have taken Sonny Tabor to be an outlaw. His clear blue eyes, shaded by the slanting brim of his cream-colored Stetson, were innocent and mild, and when he was smiling—as he was smiling now—the dimple in his tanned cheek seemed to deepen. That dimple was really the old scar of a .45 bullet.

In his checkered blue-and-white flannel shirt and his well-worn leather chaps, he might have been just a roaming saddle tramp.

A shrewd law officer, however, might have paid more than a passing glance at one item of the outlaw's equipment. That was his armament.

The wearing of two six-guns was nothing so unusual in that wilderness country. It was not so much the fact that he wore them as the way he wore them. They were single-action Colt .45s of blued steel, tucked into oiled holsters which were thonged unusually low against his thighs. Double rows of glinting cartridges crisscrossed his slim waist, and these belts, too, were carefully greased and cared for.

"What's the name of this spread, amigo?" Sonny drawled, waiting for the dark-eyed kid to return his smile.

The kid didn't return it. For the first time, Sonny took a more careful note of him. He would have been a good-looking enough waddy, ordinarily, for he had honest, clean-cut features; but now his eyes were fairly crackling, and he was white about the mouth.

"Yuh savvy danged well, hombre," he snarled, "thet this is the Broken Gun. No use pretendin' yuh didn't know."

The outlaw remembered, then, of having seen a good many cattle, the day before, that had been marked with an unusual brand which somewhat resembled, crudely, a broken six-gun, thus:

But he couldn't understand why this waddy was so hostile about it. That brand meant nothing to Sonny, one way or the other. Evidently the kid took him for some one else.

"I've never heard of it before," said the outlaw wonderingly. "Yuh've shorely got me wrong some way——"

"Yeah?" cut in the angry Broken Gun waddy. "Yuh knowed I was yere alone, didn't yuh? Thought I'd be easy meat, bein' as my dad and brother's away. Did Pascal send yuh yere 'cause he thought I'd be yaller?"

"I don't know Pascal. I just happened to drop by, amigo, an'——"

The outlaw broke off, his smile fading, for he had read the expression that had fleeted across the

ranch kid's angry face. It meant gun play. He'd seen that look on desperate men's faces before.

The Broken Gun hombre had made no move toward his holstered six-gun yet, but his right arms had gone tense, and the pupils of his eyes had dilated. He might just as well have telegraphed his intentions. Sonny could have read them a mile off.

"Easy now!" the outlaw snapped quickly. "I don't know what this is all about, or why yo're on the prod. But go slow! Don't try to go for that gun!"

"Yo're a liar when yuh say yo're not with the Pascal bunch!" the dark-eyed waddy accused furiously. "And if yo're afraid to have it out, yuh sidewinder——"

The bullet-scar dimple in Sonny Tabor's cheek deepened a little. He was sitting quite easily in his saddle, the reins gathered in one hand. With the other, he brushed a fly from Paint's glossy neck. His eyes, still friendly, were on the Broken Gun ranny.

"I'm not afraid, especially," he drawled softly. "But don't yuh think we'd better talk this over a little more reasonablelike?"

Sonny, known and dreaded as one of the deadliest gun fighters in the Southwest, was worried—not for himself, but for this ranch kid, who was so enraged, for some reason, that he'd lost his head entirely. The outlaw was pretty sure what he'd have to do if the waddy insisted on trouble. *He'd* have to shoot, and quicker, to save his own life. That was what Sonny hated to do.

The Broken Gun waddy was edging closer. The muscles of his right hand were twitching jerkily. He meant business!

"Don't draw!" the outlaw almost pleaded.

And then it happened!

With a scream as shrill as a locoed bronc's, the ranch kid's fingers clawed his gun from its holster. The morning sun glistened on blued steel as the long barrel of a .38 special leaped to a line on Sonny Tabor.

Sonny delayed as long as he could, and then, when he saw that he'd have to protect himself, his own hand moved with the bewildering speed of a whiptail lizard. That deceptive draw had sent more than one hombre to his last siesta in Boot Hill. It was a deadly blur, cold and terribly precise.

And yet, outlaw though he was, Sonny Tabor hated to kill, and he didn't kill now. As his Colt flashed and roared, the ranch kid spun half around. Something whirred through the air like a whirligig and landed in a little spurt of dust thirty feet away. It was the .38. Sonny's bullet had clipped it from the waddy's hand.

But that wasn't hint enough. The kid was quick to recover from his amazement. He wasn't through. With a defiant yell, he made a dash for his weapon. It was the act of a madman, but he seemed crazy with fury.

"Don't try it!" the outlaw shouted, jumping from his bronc like a cougar.

He tried to beat the black-eyed ranny to the gun, but saw that he couldn't make it. The kid had already scooped it up from the sand.

"This time yuh won't——" he was crying shrilly, almost sobbing with rage.

Br-r-r-rang! Whan-n-nng! The .38 and the .45 blared out almost together.

Sonny Tabor had done the only thing he could have done. He had spoiled the young puncher's aim by letting him have it through the

shoulder. Even at that, he felt the scorching wind of the kid's bullet as it zipped venomously past his face.

The shock of the big-caliber slug knocked the kid to his knees. Dazed as he was from his hurt, he would have picked up the gun again with his left hand if the outlaw hadn't kicked it away from him just in time.

"Go ahead! Finish me, yuh skunk!" hissed the wounded waddy.

He tried to make a lunge at the outlaw's legs, but missed and collapsed heavily, falling forward on his face, with a dull moan. Sonny saw that he had shot lower than he had intended. Already the ground about the kid was being mottled with scarlet.

With sinking heart, Sonny bent over him, and was trying to lift him when he heard a cry of anguish from the direction of the ranch house—the grief-stricken wail of a woman.

"You've murdered Fred! You've killed him! You've murdered my son!"

CHAPTER II.

TROUBLE.

SONNY was already sick about the whole affair, knowing that it was all a terrible mistake of some kind. But to have the kid's mother appear on the scene made things seem even worse. It was going to be mighty hard for her.

A gray-haired woman, white-faced and with tragic eyes, had come from the house and was rushing toward where her son lay groaning.

"I'm—I'm sorry I had to do it, ma'am," Sonny gasped as he lifted the wounded waddy from the ground. "He's not so bad hurt. Where shall we take him?"

The ranch woman gazed at him in bewilderment, not understanding why the man who had shot her boy should now be willing to help him. But her love for her son was stronger than anything else, and she motioned toward the ranch house.

With his now unconscious burden, Sonny followed her into a neat bedroom off the kitchen. He placed the wounded waddy on the bed, and for a while after that, both he and the mother were too busy to do any talking or explaining.

They bathed and dressed the ugly bullet wound, which was serious though not mortal. During this, the kid opened his eyes. He, too, stared perplexedly at Sonny, unable to understand his presence there. But he was too weak for questions and soon dropped off to sleep, all his anger and hate forgotten.

"He got it into his head that I was his enemy, somehow," the outlaw told the worried mother. "He thought I belonged to what he called Pascal's bunch."

The woman regarded him with mingled fear and doubt, crumpling and recrumpling her gingham apron in nervous fingers.

"Well, aren't you?"

"I'm yore friend, ma'am," said Sonny earnestly. "Won't yuh trust me? I'm tellin' the truth when I say I never heard of this Pascal, whoever he is. Why not tell me all about it, and if I can help——"

Her troubled eyes searched his face for a long moment. There was something so sincere and appealing about the outlaw that she decided to share her worries with him. She sank into a chair and was soon explaining the state of affairs at Broken Gun Ranch.

She was the wife, Sonny learned, of Jess Wiggin, the owner of the once-prosperous little outfit. The wounded waddy, Fred, was her younger son, and she had one other

son, Stan. The ranch employed one puncher, a man named Lusk.

Things had gone well on the Broken Gun until about a year before. Then Pascal and his crew of three or four gunmen had appeared upon the scene—from where, nobody knew—and had taken up headquarters somewhere in the near-by Casamonte Mountains. These desperadoes had established a reign of terror. Other spreads had suffered, but the Broken Gun and the near-by EX Connected had been the biggest losers.

"It's just as if they meant to drive us clear out of the country," said Mrs. Wiggin, almost tearfully. "They've made life intolerable for us. That's why poor Fred acted the way he did. I hope you won't hold it against him."

"I didn't, even at the beginning. I figured that maybe it was some way like this, and I'd have given anything if I hadn't had to shoot. But about this Pascal hombre, ma'am—what is it he does, exactly?"

"Just about everything," cried the ranch woman indignantly. "Sometimes out-and-out robbery. Twice, some of them came here and demanded money from my husband, practically at gun's point. And then we've been losing our cattle. Hundreds of head have disappeared. We're sure that the Pascal gang is stealing them, but we don't know how. Sometimes they just seem to vanish overnight."

"They must be pretty smart hombres," Sonny mused.

"The law hasn't been able to do anything with them, although the sheriff from Warbow has tried to trail them several times," Mrs. Wiggin said.

Sonny nodded sympathetically. And at the same time, he was wondering what this gentle-faced woman would have thought if she could have known who *he* was, and that the law would rather capture him than ten Pascals.

Sonny Tabor wasn't an outlaw by choice, or because he was vicious. He'd never stolen in his life, never blotted in a brand. And if he had killed, it was because it had been strictly necessary. He had nothing in common with border rats like Pascal.

"Yesterday," Mrs. Wiggin went on, "we got another threat from that terrible man. For some reason, he wants us to leave the country."

"That's strange," pointed out Sonny Tabor, "because it seems that yuh've been a good source of revenue so far. Why should he want yuh out?"

She shook her head. "We don't know. Stan and his father and Mr. Lusk started this morning at daybreak for the EX Connected. They wanted to ask Will Hanley's advice as to what to do."

"Mr. Hanley?"

"Yes, he's the owner of the EX Connected and a very close friend of my husband," the woman explained. "He has a very large ranch between here and Warbow. Mr. Hanley has lost lots of stock to Pascal, too, and I'm sure he will help us."

Sonny Tabor was about to reply, when to his trained ears came the tramping of hoofs. Instantly, he was on his feet, every nerve taut. Riders were approaching the house. He saw the woman's face grow white as she hastened to the window.

She gave a little cry of relief. "It's my son and my husband, and Mr. Hanley is with them. No, you mustn't go," she urged, seeing the outlaw edge toward the door on panther feet. "I know that you

didn't intend shooting Fred, and they'll understand when I explain to them."

That wasn't exactly what the fugitive was worrying about. In any case, it was too late now for him to leave. The horsemen had spied Sonny's waiting pinto, had noticed Fred's gun and the dark stains on the ground, and were coming up the pathway at an excited run.

"Mother, are yuh all right? What's been happenin'? Was thar a fight yere?" several voices were chorusing.

They came bursting in through the kitchen, spurs jingling, headed by a leathery-faced hombre of about sixty.

"Thank Heaven, yo're safe!" he cried out in relief upon seeing Mrs. Wiggin, but his gnarled hand dropped over the butt of his gun when he saw that a stranger was in the room.

The three other hombres who were with him looked hostile, too, but the ranch woman was quick to explain.

"Yes, Fred has been shot, but not badly," she told them. "It was all a mistake, every bit of it, and everything's all right. You know how hot-headed Fred is."

"Who is *this* younker?" old Jess Wiggin demanded, relaxing a bit.

"Well, I declare!" his wife ejaculated, turning to the tense and silent outlaw. "Here I've been talking to you all this time and never asked it! I guess you'll have to tell us who you are."

CHAPTER III.

TRAPPED!

SONNY hesitated only a moment. A quick glance at these hombres satisfied him that he hadn't been recognized—at least, not yet. He'd been half afraid of that, for his picture and description were on many a reward poster.

"Just call me 'Tabe,' " he drawled. "I'm sorry about what happened," he added, and in a few words he gave them a truthful version of his encounter with Fred Wiggin.

"Well, seein' as thet's the case, I reckon it's Fred thet owes *you* an apology," said Jess Wiggin heartily. "Bein' took fer one of Pascal's skunks is what I'd call an insult. Glad to know yuh, Tabe. This is Fred's brother, Stan."

Stan Wiggin shook hands with Sonny in a very friendly way. He resembled his younger brother, except that he was tall and lanky. In addition to a six-gun at his hip, he wore another in a shoulder harness underneath a floppy calfskin vest.

Sonny was then introduced to Lusk, the Broken Gun puncher, and to Will Hanley, the owner of the EX Connected.

Hanley was a rather handsome man, aged about forty-five, clean-shaven and dressed like a typical prosperous rancher. A blue silk neckerchief was drawn through a heavy gold ring at his throat, and another glistened on his finger. His Colt was pearl-handled and silver-mounted.

Mrs. Wiggin bustled out into the kitchen for extra chairs, and the men all settled down for a talk and a smoke. Fred was still sleeping quietly, and he had a better color in his face.

Sonny didn't smoke, and he did very little of the talking, being content rather to listen. Jess Wiggin had already decided to take the wounded man to the medico at Warbow, and had sent Lusk out to harness up the buckboard.

Somehow, Sonny didn't much like the looks of Lusk. He was a pow-

erfully built hombre, with long, ape-like arms, and his round, solid head seemed to fit, neckless, on his square shoulders. He had misshapen buck-teeth and cavernous nostrils.

Before Luck went outside, Sonny had caught the man staring at him in a peculiar way. Just what that strange look meant, Sonny didn't know—yet. But it gave him a queer feeling.

"Regardin' this threat yuh've just got, Wiggin," said Will Hanley, lighting up a cigarette and thoughtfully inhaling the smoke. "Under the circumstances, it might be best for yuh to do as they say. Pascal won't stop short of murder."

"We're not goin' to let them gunnies chase us out!" cried Stan Wiggin fiercely. "The Broken Gun is ours, and we ain't a-lettin' it go!"

The owner of the EX Connected nodded understandingly. "I shore savvy how yuh feel about it," he said, "but yuh've more than just yoreselves to think of. If somethin' should happen to Mrs. Wiggin——"

"I'm not afraid," the ranch woman put in spiritedly. "I feel just as the menfolks do about it. We're not going to let those men scare us off our property."

"Thet's the ticket, Molly," approved Jess Wiggin, and then he turned to his friend, Hanley. "I'll stick ontil they bust me," he growled. "I'm afraid thet it won't be long, the way things is goin'. I'd give my right eye if I knowed how they're stealin' my cattle right from under my nose. Them cows ain't been drove away. They're jist vanishin'. I ain't got a third of the calves I ought to have. Whar are they? Thet's what I'd like to know."

"As I told yuh before, Jess," said Will Hanley generously, "I'll buy the Broken Gun, take it off yore hands if yuh say the word. O' course, the way times is, I can't give yuh but a fraction of what the spread is worth, but it might be wisest fer yuh to sell to me."

"I'll think it over, Will," began Wiggin, "but I——"

The door of the kitchen burst open with an explosive bang. Into the room leaped the Broken Gun puncher, Lusk, with a Colt in his hand. It was leveled from the hip at Sonny Tabor.

"Git yore mitts up, younker!" he snarled. "Up with 'em, or I'll blow out yore insides!"

The others, astonished and dumfounded, jumped from their chairs.

"What's the meanin' of this, Lusk?" Stan Wiggin cried angrily.

Sonny got to his feet slowly, saw that Lusk had a dead drop, and raised his hands shoulder-high. He had been careless. That sneaky expression on Lusk's face before he went out should have warned him. And it was too late now.

"What's the meanin'?" Lusk leered triumphantly, never once taking his snaky little eyes off his prisoner. "It means jist this. The kid, yere, who said his name was Tabe, is an outlaw with six-thousand-dollar reward fer him, dead or alive! His real name is Sonny Tabor!"

CHAPTER IV.

QUICK THINKING.

THE dead silence that followed Lusk's announcement seemed—to Sonny, at least—to last for centuries. He heard them gasp unbelievingly. The name "Tabor" was notorious throughout Arizona; they had all heard it before, even Mrs. Wiggin, who had turned white. All of them stared in dismay.

"I knowed Tabor from the fust." Lusk grinned, keeping his cocked

gun trained on the young outlaw's heart. "I've seen his pictures in Warbow and other places. He's supposed to be plenty fast with his cutters, though, so I didn't take no chances on gittin' the drop. Then yuh sent me out to hitch up the buckboard, and thet was my chance. Got yuh flat-footed, hey, Tabor?"

Sonny fixed his calm blue eyes on Lusk's triumph-flushed face and regarded him silently. He was trapped; the hangman's noose awaited him now, but that wasn't what hurt him most. What would the Wiggins think of him? He wished that he'd told the woman his true identity right at the first. Of course, they wouldn't believe in his sincerity now.

"It isn't true, is it, Tabe?" Mrs. Wiggin asked pleadingly. "You are not really that terrible outlaw. It's a mistake, isn't it?"

Sonny took a deep breath and shook his head slightly. "He's got me right, ma'am. My name's Tabor, and the law's a-lookin' for me," he admitted slowly.

"Then the shootin' of my kid brother wasn't in self-defense, after all!" accused Stan Wiggin.

"I told yuh the truth about that," said the outlaw steadily. "If I'd intended Fred any harm, I wouldn't have tried to help him afterward."

Old Jess had turned beet-red, and he was glaring at Sonny as if he had been some species of ferocious beast. There was no friendliness in his expression now.

"Why, yuh young snake!" he bellowed. "Yo're yere to spy, to find out all yuh kin; thet's why yo're yere! But thanks to Lusk, yuh didn't git by with it. We'll take yuh over to Warbow and turn yuh over to the law; thet's what we'll do. Yo're one of the Pascal gang, and don't try to deny it!"

Sonny's boyish face flushed, and he swallowed hard. "But I *am* denyin'," he protested hopelessly. "I reckon it won't do me any good to tell the truth; yuh wouldn't believe me, anyhow. But I didn't come here for any wrong purpose. I wanted a job, and——"

Will Hanley broke in with a thin and humorless laugh. "Cut the bluff, Tabor," he said contemptuously. "Yo're hand in glove with Pascal, and yuh know it. So do we —now. The game's up, yuh young killer!"

The faces of the men around him were bleak and hard, but Sonny saw pity and sympathy on Mrs. Wiggin's face, and that hurt him more than anything else. She would always think of him as a schemer, a liar, and worse.

"Better take his guns away from him," urged the grinning Lusk. "You git 'em, Hanley."

"*Bueno,*" chuckled the owner of the EX Connected.

Perhaps he was just a little careless. Possibly he forgot, for a moment, that he was dealing with an hombre who had long been the despair of every peace officer who had come in contact with him. Sonny Tabor was as slippery as a greased lizard, as quick to think and act as a cornered wild cat. And Will Hanley found it out.

The EX Connected owner stepped up to Sonny, and in doing so, passed between the outlaw and Lusk's covering gun—just for an instant, but that was enough.

When Hanley reached for the outlaw's belt buckles, he felt himself seized in a steel embrace. Sonny's hands, which had been over his head, had flashed down with amazing swiftness.

One of the outlaw's strong arms encircled Hanley, holding him in

place as a shield, so that Lusk was unable to shoot. His other hand snapped a Colt single-action from the leather.

"Hands up, all of yuh!" he barked.

Lusk's ugly face turned a greenish hue, and the gun clattered from his trembling hand to the floor. Old Wiggin and his son hesitated, but only for a moment. They raised their arms, and as they did so, Sonny whirled Hanley away from him. The ranchman hit the wall with such force that his legs crumpled under him like green sticks.

"All right now, shuck yore guns—one at a time, startin' with you, Mr. Wiggin," the outlaw's voice crackled like a charge of electric sparks. "Throw 'em out of that window behind yuh, and remember, I've got the drop!"

Mrs. Wiggin had given a little scream, but the gentlemanly young outlaw was quick to reassure her.

"I don't want any more trouble, ma'am, and I don't think there will be any." He smiled as the disgruntled men began tossing their guns through a window that opened toward the rear of the house. "I'm sorry if I'm makin' yuh uneasy, but I'll be gone from here in just a jiffy. Yuh might advise yore menfolks not to follow me."

"You—you whippersnapper!" Will Hanley roared. "Yuh'll git yores yet, Tabor! Yuh've won this hand, but thar'll be another deal!"

"I'll play cards with yuh any time," said the outlaw cheerily. "Now if you gents are wise, yuh'll stay in the house until I'm out of sight. Adios, until we meet again!"

He backed deliberately into the kitchen and out through the rear door. He could hear Lusk swearing at the top of his voice, in spite of the presence of the woman, and Sonny's jaw hardened. He hoped that he and Lusk would cross trails again some day.

Paint was faithfully waiting in the yard, the scene of the gun fracas with Fred Wiggin. Seeing that Fred's .38 special still lay in the dust, Sonny scooped it up. He knew that the Broken Gun hombres would charge out of the house after him as soon as they dared, and he didn't want them banging away at him unexpectedly. They would have to go clear around the house to get their own weapons.

"'*Sta bien*, Paint boy," chuckled the outlaw as he hurdled into his saddle. "Let's vamose from here!"

The pinto bronc pivoted around on its hind legs with a little squeal and came down with hoofs churning.

A few seconds more, and there wasn't anything to be seen of Sonny Tabor but his dust.

CHAPTER V.

KILLERS' CAVE.

THREE days later, Sonny was still within thirty miles of Broken Gun Ranch. He could easily have been a hundred miles deep into another county, but he didn't want to leave the vicinity, in spite of the risk to himself, until certain strange matters were cleared up.

As he had expected, Jess Wiggin and his son, Lusk, and Hanley lost no time in getting on his trail. Paint, however, had little difficulty in shaking off pursuit. The wiry little animal was as swift and surefooted as an antelope, and although the Broken Gun hombres hung on doggedly throughout the day, they could never get within rifle range.

The next day, the outlaw saw a posse scouring the foothills, but they didn't see him. Evidently, the

sheriff at Warbow had been notified. From the heights, Sonny watched them beating the arroyos and dry washes far below. After a while, the posse split up, and he lost sight of them. The sheriff thought, no doubt, that Sonny was putting all the ground possible between him and the Broken Gun, and believed that searching the near-by country would be a waste of time. Sonny had outguessed them.

Several grim mountain chains rose bleakly over the desert, naked walls of stone and lava. Some were as red as fire, carved into weird shapes by the wind and water of untold centuries. Others were like ebony, as glassy as obsidian. The highest and most desolate peaks belonged to the Casamonte range, and on the third day, the outlaw found himself deep in their mystic maze.

It was a melancholy country, one that would depress the lightest spirits. In the deep canyons that split it, invisible from the lowlands below, grew gloomy thickets and tangles of walnut and oak trees, forbidding brush and prickly pear. A few gaunt jack rabbits and a rattlesnake or two were the only living things Sonny encountered.

At noon, Sonny halted by a rare spring of water, ate the last of the meager supply of provisions he had with him, and gave his pinto cayuse a chance to crop a little grass. Stretching himself out for a brief rest, he examined his surroundings with attentive eyes.

On both sides towered dizzy cliffs, pitted with caves. Some were shallow, in the process of formation; others were huge black tunnels. Higher up, where the spires of rock were thin, there were openings through which he could see blue sky on the other side. Only a bird could reach some of these caverns.

"Not a bad country to hide away in, eh, Paint?"

The pinto jingled its bit chain. Mountain, desert, wilderness—it was all the same to Paint, as long as his master was with him. Both of them were used to hardship and danger.

Sonny swung into the saddle again, and once more Paint's little hoofs began to beat briskly through the canyon.

Down at the bottom of the dismal gorge, sunlight penetrated for only a few hours each day, and by four o'clock, the shadows began to deepen, although the lofty cliff tops were still glowing like fire. The trees began to look like ghosts, and the air became sharp and chill.

Suddenly the outlaw drew up and looked down. At Paint's feet lay a horseshoe, unrusted.

That could mean only one thing —this canyon wasn't so deserted as it seemed to be. A bronc had thrown that shoe within the last few days.

By going over the ground carefully, Sonny was able to pick up a faint trail. It led off through the dense brush toward the west cliff, and he followed it cautiously. He could tell that he was on tracks, for Paint's ears were sharply drawn.

Then a whiff of wood smoke, perfumed with frying bacon, reached his nostrils. Some one was cooking supper.

"Pull in yore bronc, kid! And git yore hands up high!"

The harsh command had come without warning, although Sonny Tabor, as alert as a timber cat, had been expecting it. Two evil-faced hombres had emerged, like specters, from the brake.

One of the desperadoes was very tall and thin, with bristling eyebrows and an enormous nose. The

shorter of the pair was wearing a skin-tight silk shirt of bright purple, and in contrast, a short red beard was matted over his chin and throat. They were scarcely a dozen yards from Sonny, and the purple-shirted man was lifting a high-powered rifle.

Before he could line his sights, the outlaw's hands moved like lightning—not toward the sky, but toward the holstered .45s at his thighs! Two shots crashed out almost as one, sending the echoes rocketing deafeningly up and down the canyon.

The gunman with the big nose gave a yelp of dismay as his soiled Stetson hat rose from his misshapen head as if jerked by an invisible string. The purple-shirted desperado's battered sombrero, too, went sailing into the bushes, its crown neatly bored by a round black hole.

"And now, caballeros," drawled Sonny Tabor, "if yuh want yore hair combed——"

The two hatless ruffians, bent double, plunged sidewise into the brush for shelter. Then they whirled about to shoot it out.

"Show us up, will yuh, yuh baby-faced banty?" yelled the big-nosed hombre. "Drop him, Pink! Burn him down!"

If they wanted fight, Sonny was willing. There was an interruption, however, from the fringe of trees that lined the cliffside above. A third hombre, this one astride a black bronc, hove into view, with a shout:

"Crossette! Big-nose! Lay off 'im! I seen what happened, and I'm tellin' yuh to put up yore guns! I'll handle this."

There was no more shooting. The two desperadoes came carefully from the brush, swearing under their breaths. Sonny sat grimly on his motionless bronc, a smoking .45 in each hand, waiting.

The gang leader—for such the newcomer appeared to be—was one of the most repulsive hombres Sonny Tabor had ever seen. As he came closer, the young outlaw couldn't suppress a little shiver of loathing. His nerves weren't easily shocked, but this man—a half-breed, judging from the swarthiness of his complexion—made his flesh creep.

He was a man in the thirties, of agile build, with lean and spidery arms and legs. His face was horse-shaped, his low forehead lined with deep wrinkles. Sonny had never seen a more cruel and crafty pair of eyes; they were set deep into his skull, and were as unblinking as a reptile's. The mouth was a straight, hard gash, and the nose was shaped like a buzzard's beak. His expression was one of vicious wickedness.

He was grinning broadly now, however, at Sonny Tabor, showing a line of notched, stained teeth in what was meant to be a smile of greeting.

"Where did yuh learn to shoot like thet, younker?" he asked, half in banter and half in admiration.

"In a pretty smoky schoolhouse," Sonny said mildly, sliding his .45s back in their holsters. "Yore men act sort of sudden, don't they, hombre?"

The half-breed's beady eyes were fastened on Sonny like cold steel pincers. They went over him and his outfit slowly, and seemed to miss nothing.

"Have yuh had supper, young un?" he asked.

There were protests from the two gunmen who'd had their hats tipped.

"How do we know but what he's a spy?" snarled the red-whiskered

hombre in the bright shirt. "The law might be right behind him. Anyways, I don't like his looks, and if yuh want my advice——"

"If I do, I'll ask fer it!" snarled the leader wolfishly, and then he stared at Sonny again. "On the dodge, ain't yuh, kid?" he demanded, his little eyes narrowing shrewdly.

"The John Laws and me are on the outs, if that's what yuh mean," the blue-eyed outlaw admitted.

"How'd yuh like to git in a good thing?"

"Meanin'?" Sonny drawled.

"How'd yuh like to join up with my leetle outfit?" the half-breed questioned. "What's yore name, by the way? It needn't be the right one. We ain't partic'lar."

"Tabe," the young fugitive replied. "And yores, hombre?"

"Pascal. Mebbe yuh've heard of me, eh?"

Sonny had already guessed that, and he wasn't especially surprised. His face did not change expression.

"Yes, I've heard of yuh," he said quietly.

Pascal swelled out his chest, grinning. He was very vain and proud of himself, and it pleased him to think himself notorious. His conceit sickened Sonny Tabor, but as it was his plan to learn as much as he could, he returned the bandit leader's smile.

"Would yuh like to tie up with me?"

"I'm willin' to talk things over, anyhow," said the outlaw, his mind clicking swiftly.

He remembered promising Mrs. Wiggin that he would help her if he could. Well, perhaps his chance was coming!

"Come along with us to the hide-out," Pascal invited. "Supper's a-cookin', and we kin do our palaverin' while we eat."

Pascal led the way to his headquarters. Sonny followed closely, and the two surly gunmen came along on foot. The hide-out, only a few hundred yards away and concealed by a dense pine thicket, was a huge cave in the foot of the cliff. It was so large at the mouth that part of it had been fenced off to make a corral for the gang's horses.

Pascal turned his mount into the inclosure, and Sonny did likewise with Paint. The desperadoes seemed to have an ample supply of grain and baled hay for their animals. They had been using this hiding place, no doubt, for many months.

There was one other member of the bandit crew—the hombre who was cooking the supper. His name was Hal Sangman—a slouchy, untidy man with a yellow mustache and blotched, alcoholic face. He acknowledged the introduction to Tabe with a peevish grunt.

They all squatted down to the meal, which consisted of meat, boiled potatoes, beans, sour-dough bread, and great steaming tin cups of coffee. Both "Pink" Crossette and "Big-nose" glared at Sonny during supper. They hated him for the way he had shown them up, but as Pascal was very much the boss, they said nothing.

"I'm needin' another gunny jist at this time," said Pascal, with his mouth full of food. "Thar's an important job a-comin' up most any time now." He eyed Sonny Tabor cunningly.

"Aimin' to run off some stock?" the young outlaw asked carelessly.

"It's goin' to be more than thet," the gunman leader chortled. "Thar's some hombres thet's got to be put out of the way. Savvy, Tabe?"

"Don't make the kid squeamish

while he's eatin', Pascal," sneered Sangman, sucking coffee through his drooping mustache and winking at the others.

It was almost dark now, and the light of the fire painted the walls and lofty ceiling of the cave in flickering scarlet. It fell on the cold, brutal faces of the men and glistened brassily on their cartridge belts.

They were a hard-looking outfit, and Sonny didn't wonder much that the Broken Gun Ranch was up in arms. No wonder young Fred Wiggin had lost his head. And what mischief was afoot now? When Pascal spoke of murder, did he mean that——

Suddenly a new voice broke in—a harsh, triumphant voice that Sonny had heard before. It came from the cave entrance behind him:

"Don't move, Tabor! Don't move an inch, or I'll ream yuh!"

It was the voice of Lusk, the Broken Gun puncher!

CHAPTER VI.

A JAM.

SONNY TABOR heard the triple click of a gun hammer. He knew without turning his head that he was covered, and at point-blank range.

Pascal and the others jumped to their feet.

"Oh, howdy, thar, Lusk," Big-nose grunted. "We was expectin' yuh, but—but what's the idea——"

"Yeah," demanded Pascal, "what have yuh got agin' Tabe? He ain't a law sneak, is he?"

Lusk, grinning evilly, slipped forward into the lamplight, a big blued six-gun lined on the silent young outlaw.

"Take the kid's guns offn him, and I'll explain later," he chuckled. "And be keerful about it. Remember, Tabor, thet I'm a-watchin' yuh, and I've got a bead drawed on thet head of yores. Yuh ain't goin' to pull no fancy tricks *this* time!"

Pascal's jaw dropped in amazement. "What did yuh call this younker? Say it ag'in!" he gasped out.

"Men, this is Tabor, the outlaw thet the John Laws want so bad," Lusk explained. "I had him once, the other day, down at the Broken Gun, but he slipped me. Now I've got him!"

Big-nose and Pink Crossette, who had hated Sonny from the beginning, hastened to strip off his gun belts. Pascal, though, blinked at Lusk in surprise.

"Sure, I've heard o' Tabor, but I didn't think he'd be a kid like this," he admitted. "Why all this? He might be valyable to us. We kin use him in the gang."

"Couldn't we use six thousand dollars better?" Lusk smirked.

"What do yuh mean?"

"Thet thar's thet much in reward dinero fer Tabor, dead or alive!" Lusk cried exultingly. "Which would we rather have—Tabor or the money he's worth to us?"

An eager grin flitted over the bandit leader's evil face, and a yell of delight went up from the others. They'd sell him out, of course. They would have betrayed him for a tenth of that sum. A cold fury swept over Sonny Tabor, and his pulses galloped hard. He was in a wolf pack!

It wasn't his own peril, however, that most angered him. Lusk, whom the Wiggins trusted, was a traitor to the Broken Gun and sunk lower in infamy than Pascal and the others, who were out-and-out bandits. Sonny's empty hands itched for his rascally throat. He wondered what the Wiggins would say if they could have known!

"Sit down, Tabor! We're goin' to keep our eyes on you," ordered Pascal. "Yuh mean a lot o' dinero to us."

"How we goin' to collect the reward?" Pink Crossette grunted into his fiery beard.

"Yeah, thet's right," Sangman agreed. "It'd look purty, wouldn't it, *us* turnin' him over to the sheriff! Why, we dassn't show ourselves in Warbow!"

Lusk showed his yellowed teeth in a laugh. "I got it all figured out," he crowed. "*My* reputation is *bueno* in Warbow. I'm a puncher fer Wiggin, savvy? I'll take Tabor to town myself, and I'll collect the reward."

"But if Tabor blabs about the whole thing—and he would, o' course——" Pascal blurted.

"Tabor," Lusk said in a hoarse whisper, "won't be able to blab. He won't be alive when I bring him into Warbow. And *now* do yuh see?"

"Good fer you, Lusk!" Pascal nodded admiringly. "Yuh've got a good head on yore shoulders. But about the other—the job at the Broken Gun. When do we——"

"Right now, pronto," said Lusk.

"Yuh mean we ride to-night?"

"Yeah." The Broken Gun traitor nodded. "Thet's why I'm yere—to tell yuh. I didn't expect to find Tabor. When I saw his bronc in the corral jist now, though, I knowed I was a-killin' two birds with one stone."

"Well, we're ready to ride, ain't we, boys?" Pascal yawned. "If we start now, we kin git thar by daylight. Come on, and let's saddle up! We got plenty miles to cover."

"And I'll take Tabor on into Warbow," Lusk snickered. "Yuh won't need me at the Wiggins'. I'd best not show myself with yuh, anyhow. How will yuh like to take a leetle trip with me, eh, Tabor?"

Sonny's face wasn't so boyish now; it was as stiff as if hewn from granite, and his eyes were icy.

"Yuh sneakin' sidewinder!" he said softly, and then turned to the others for a last desperate appeal, not for himself, but for others. "There's a woman at that ranch," he cried, "and if yuh intend to murder——"

"Yallar, eh? I thought yuh was," Big-nose sneered. "But yuh've got troubles of yore own, yuh leetle whelp! Yuh've done yore last piece of hat-shootin', son."

"Yes, I'll shoot lower next time," Sonny snapped grimly.

Pascal and his three gunmen made hasty preparations for their departure, examining their guns and filling the empty loops in their ammunition belts.

A bottle was passed around, and then the quartet of desperadoes saddled their horses and mounted. Lusk stayed at the fire with Sonny, Colt six-gun in hand. He didn't take his eyes from his prisoner for a moment.

With Pascal leading, the gang shouted a hoarse farewell and clattered down the trail into the darkness, just as the moon rose over the opposite wall of the deep canyon.

Lusk rolled a cigarette with his free hand and then grinned across at his captive.

"And now," he mocked, "I'll attend to *yore* case."

CHAPTER VII.

.38 SPECIAL.

LUSK had already made his plans, and he spoke of them gloatingly to his victim, hoping to crack the youthful outlaw's nerve.

It was Lusk's intention to start

at once for the distant county-seat town of Warbow, on the desert. Sonny would ride there with him at gun's point. And then, just before entering the town, which they would probably reach just before dawn, Lusk would shoot Sonny to death and take the body to the sheriff for the reward.

"Yuh'll make a mighty han'some corpse, Tabor, with thet baby face of yores," the treacherous puncher taunted. "I'll have a story all cooked up fer the sheriff—how I had to kill yuh when yuh tried to draw on me after I had the drop. Ho-ho! But I'll put it on thick."

"What's yore game, anyhow, Lusk?" the outlaw asked in a steady tone.

"I've jist told yuh." The ugly cow-puncher grinned.

"I don't mean about me," Sonny flashed back. "What's yore game with the Wiggins?"

"Don't yuh wish yuh knowed?" Lusk gibed.

"I've already made a good guess," the outlaw said evenly. "Pascal's not the real boss of that murderin' crew."

"Shut up!" Lusk snarled furiously. "What yuh know, or think yuh know, ain't goin' to do yuh no good. Yo're goin' on yore last sashay, Tabor. Slap yore hull on thet pinto of yores. And don't try anything, savvy? I'm keepin' yuh covered, and if thar's any funny business, I'll let yuh have it right yere."

The moonlight was very bright now, except where the trees cast their gloomy shadows, and Lusk could see his captive's every move. He came to the fence of the tiny corral, and waited there with cocked gun.

Sonny had no choice but to obey his orders. He slapped the saddle on Paint, tightened the girths and mounted. Lusk swung aboard his own cayuse, a white-stockinged roan.

"We'll go down the canyon, then fork off south as soon as we git out of the Casamontes—then the desert, understand? rasped Lusk harshly. "And git this straight. Keep in the center of the canyon, in the moonlight. I'll be right behind yuh, or alongside, and if yuh want to see how quick I kin shoot, jist try me! Yuh fooled me once, but yuh won't ag'in."

"I savvy," said Sonny, with a mirthless curl of his lips. "All right, Paint."

The two riders—the outlaw and his captor—*clip-clopped* down the steep trail to the bottom of the gorge. Lusk, as wary as a coyote, stuck close to Sonny and was never more than a couple of yards in the rear.

"Keep agoin', Tabor," snarled the Broken Gun traitor. "No faster, mind. We got plenty of time."

At the end of an hour, they were out of the dismal mountain gorge and descending onto the mesquite-dotted plain. Lusk was still keeping the same distance behind the outlaw, close enough so that he could shoot accurately and yet not close enough for Sonny to grapple with him.

Lusk talked continually, hoping to see the outlaw break down. He spoke gloatingly of what he intended to do, and of the gay time he would have in spending the reward money.

"The Mexes have got a good name fer what I'm goin' to do, Tabor," he chortled. "They call it *'ley fuego'*—they let a man try to escape, and then they kill him. I'm goin' to go 'em one better. I'm goin' to kill yuh, whether yuh try to escape or not."

"When the time comes, Lusk," Sonny advised easily, "don't miss."

Sonny's twin .45s had been taken from him, but he wasn't quite so helpless as Lusk thought. When he had made his escape from the Broken Gun spread, he had snatched up Fred Wiggin's .38 special from the ground. He had thrust it into the saddle pocket, and it was still there. Until this emergency, he had almost forgotten it.

Even though Sonny was within reach of a gun, however, Lusk had every advantage. The young outlaw would have to whisk the .38 from the tight leather pocket, turn and fire before the desperado's trigger finger could tighten. Stil, it would have to be risked; a slim chance was better than none.

"Yuh got a couple hours more to live, Tabor," taunted the traitor, "and thet's about all. A couple of hours, and then two or three slugs through yore noggin. Thet's better than hangin', anyway, ain't it, younker?"

Sonny did not reply, but his nerves were like tightly strung steel wires. He wondered if he would bungle, if he would be too slow, or, even worse, miss. He wasn't accustomed to the lighter .38 gun. It was a double-action "break-in-two" model, he remembered, with a long barrel. What if he fumbled?

It was a glorious night, but Sonny was too worried to pay much attention to the beauty of it. Not a breath of air stirred over the silver sands, and the moonlit sky was sprinkled with diamond dust. Between the mesquite clumps rose ghostly yucca, straight and tall, and here and there a branched saguaro.

"Whatever I'm goin' to do I'd better do quick," thought the outlaw desperately.

His wasn't the only life that hung in the balance. The thought of the quartet of killers who were on their way to the Wiggin ranch sent a chill tingling down his spine.

For all he knew, some of the chambers of Fred's .38 might have been unloaded. He hadn't looked. Suppose the gun was empty! Fred had fired several shots; he tried to remember just how many.

"Yuh'd saved the boys some trouble, kid, if yuh'd killed Fred thet day instead of reamin' his shoulder," guffawed the faithless Broken Gun waddy.

"And I'd have saved myself some trouble if I'd let *you* have it, then, wouldn't I?" the outlaw drawled.

Just ahead of them, a shallow arroyo had come into view. They would have to cross it, descend a sloping four-foot bank and climb up the opposite one.

Sonny had been waiting for something like this. Lusk would have to pay a little attention to his riding, and wouldn't be able to watch his prisoner so carefully. Sonny guided Paint over the bank, his heart thumping. Now or never!

He heard saddle leather creak just behind him, the ring of a shoe as Lusk's roan made the sliding descent. Then Sonny's right hand darted toward that hidden gun. He whirled around sharply in his seat.

"All right, Lusk!"

Br-r-r-rang! Bang!

There was a burst of crimson flame, a shower of yellow sparks as if from a whirling wheel of emery. Sonny, who had squeezed himself low, heard the *br-r-r-r-r* of Lusk's wildly fired bullet as it droned over his head. Smoke churned up, pale and gray in the moonlight.

Sonny Tabor had not missed! There was a thud as Lusk's toppling

bulk tumbled to the sandy arroyo bottom. The outlaw had pulled the gun, turned and fired all in the same, swift motion, and the bullet had taken Lusk full in the throat.

Sonny dismounted and walked over to where the dying traitor lay, thrashing his last. Stooping, he picked up his still-smoking gun.

"I'm sorry, Lusk, but yuh had it comin'," he said quietly.

There was more of amazement than pain in Lusk's glassy eyes. An oath rattled in his throat; then he straightened stiffly and lay still.

"Come on, Paint. Our work's just beginnin'," Sonny urged, vaulting back into his saddle. "We've got to split the wind!"

The pinto cayuse seemed to understand how much depended on its flying hoofs, for when Sonny whirled him around, he made the leather fairly pop, and was off like a hurricane in the direction of Broken Gun Ranch.

CHAPTER VIII.

PASCAL PAYS A CALL.

THE eastern sky was a murky gray and the stars were dimming overhead, when Pascal, Sangman, Pink Crossette, and Big-nose pulled their horses to halt at the edge of the ocotillo fence near the dobe ranch house of the Wiggin family. They had taken it easy, and had timed their arrival according to Pascal's plans.

"They're all asleep in thar, or, at best, they're jist wakin' up." The swarthy leader grinned. "Leave yore 'chesters in their scabbards; we ain't goin' to need the long guns. Thet's the kitchen door right over thar—the *only* door. If we bust thet in and rush 'em, we've got 'em trapped."

"What if they don't show fight?" Sangman hesitated. "Shall we—jist the same?"

"They've had their chance, and orders is they don't git no more," Pascal snarled. "We shoot to kill. The woman? Well, I hope she don't git in our way, thet's all. It'll be too bad fer the old lady if she does."

"Well, let's git it over. It'll soon be broad daylight," grunted the red-whiskered Pink Crossette, twirling the cylinder of his six-gun.

Pascal leading, they edged silently along the fence toward the front of the house, stopping at times to listen for signs of life inside. But all was quiet. The Wiggins hadn't yet awakened, and the coast was clear.

"All right, we'll ram in the door," the half-breed leader whispered hoarsely. "It's prob'ly locked, but it ain't very strong. Come on!"

Pascal, Crossette, and Big-nose rushed forward, charging the slab door with their shoulders, and Sangman was only a step behind. The door trembled, sagged, but resisted the first onslaught, and the desperadoes struck it again. It fell with a resounding crash, torn from its fastenings.

The startled cry of a woman echoed through the house as the raiders leaped across the wreckage of the door and swarmed through the kitchen into the next room, guns drawn.

The room contained a bed and two narrow bunks, and was occupied by Wiggin and his two sons, Mrs. Wiggin's bedroom being the smaller one beyond. The morning light was dim, but Pascal's gunmen could see well enough for their purpose. Their victims were there, and at their mercy.

Still bewildered and with eyelids

heavy from sleep, old Jess Wiggin and his elder son, Stan, had just jumped out of their blankets. Fred was sprawled out on the bed, awake but helpless, his shoulder and chest being swathed in bandages.

"Pascal!" he cried wrathfully.

"The same." The breed bowed mockingly. "And yere's whar yuh git it, yuh Wiggins! Did yuh think we was a-foolin' when we warned yuh?"

"No, yuh don't!" Big-nose yelled at Stan, who was edging toward the head of his bed, where his gun belts hung. "Not you, either, yuh old coot!" he snarled, as Jess Wiggin turned desperately toward a Winchester rifle that rested in a gun rack on the wall. "Shall we let 'em have it, Pascal?"

The Wiggin men saw that it was in the cards for them to die, and they faced their fate like the brave hombres they were. With a defiant yell, Stan hurled himself at Pink Crossette.

"Yuh danged rattlers, we'll die a-fightin', anyhow!"

Before Crossette could shoot, his attention was diverted. Mrs. Wiggin, her hair loosened and her face paper-white, ran into the room, with a plaintive scream. She wore only a shawl over her night dress. If her men were to die, she meant to die with them.

"Kill me, too!" she moaned.

The gang was taken aback, but only for a moment. The mother's entreaties would have touched hearts of granite, but Pascal and his henchmen had no hearts. Crossette clubbed Stan Wiggin to the floor with a vicious blow from his gun barrel.

"Clean 'em out!" Pascal bellowed.

Then they stood in their tracks. Somebody had calmly walked in through the kitchen door behind them!

"Just a minute, you sidewinders!" crackled a voice they all had heard before. "If yuh want to clean house, yuh can start right in on *me!*"

They whirled about. In the doorway, with a gun in each hand, leveled from the hip, stood a coldly smiling young hombre with a bullet dimple in his cheek. His checkered blue shirt was ripped and torn by cactus; his hat was gone, and his chaparajos were covered with alkali, but his eyes were like hot blue stars.

"Tabor!" yelped Pascal.

Instantly, the room was filled with wreaths of blue smoke, funeral wreaths of powder haze, lashed through by spitting pencils of fire. The walls shook, the floor trembled, and bits of adobe showered down from the ceiling.

"Get down low, Mother Wiggin!" the young outlaw shouted above the hammering of death.

He had jumped sidewise from the doorway like a crab doing a fancy waltz step. His lithe body was bent at a boxer's crouch, and his guns roared destruction. The shots came so fast that they made a terrific staccato *br-r-r-r-r.*

Hal Sangman went down like an uprooted tree, falling across Fred Wiggin on the bed and spattering him with scarlet. He had been shot through the heart.

Big-nose screeched hideously and spun on the heels of his boots. He had been shot in the mouth; the bullet had passed entirely through his head and had knocked a chunk of plaster from the wall. Another slug hit him just above the belt line, and he crumpled to his knees. Still screeching, he tried to crawl on all

fours past Sonny Tabor through the door, but he fell and died on the threshold.

The Wiggins had taken advantage of the break Sonny had given them. Stan had leaped for his six-guns, and his father had torn the rifle from the rack. In a very few seconds, the complexion of things had completely changed. The gang—what was left of it—was on the hotter end of it now.

"Take it, yuh murderin' scallywags!" the rancher roared, turning on Pink Crossette and churning the loading lever of the big-caliber rifle.

Stan Wiggin let drive at the same instant, and the red-whiskered desperado seemed to curl up and sizzle in his boots. The range was so short that his gaudy purple shirt caught fire from the powder flashes. Slug after slug chugged into his thickset body, and at each impact, his drooling mouth seemed to open wider.

He was dead on his feet. Finally, he fell like a burst sack of grain, his clothing still smoking from the shots.

Pascal, the last survivor, had been hit, too, but he managed to make it past Sonny Tabor. With the Wiggin men after him, he lumbered through the kitchen and lurched through the outer door, leaving a spattered crimson track.

"Don't shoot him in the back! He's done for!" Sonny cried, as they all rushed after him.

The half-breed desperado nearly made it to his horse, but not quite. He fell almost under the legs of the animal, his gun slithering from his powerless fingers. Supporting himself on his hands, he glared at the victors with fast-glazing yellowish eyes.

"Tabor, it was you thet done this!" he shrilled. "If it hadn't been fer you——"

The death rattle clattered in his throat, and in another moment, he had tasted the bitter death that he had planned for others.

CHAPTER IX.

SIX-GUN PAY-OFF.

FOR several minutes, the Wiggin men were so overcome that they were unable to speak; they could only wring Sonny Tabor's hand in silent gratitude. It was young Fred Wiggin, whom Sonny had wounded several days before, who broke the tension. He had tottered out with the others and was still able to grin.

"Golly, Sonny, but yuh shore opened our peepers fer us!" he cried. "We had yuh wrong, right from the start. We'd have been goners, shore, if yuh hadn't walked in when yuh did. We owe yuh——"

Sonny nodded toward a lathered pinto cayuse that stood waiting patiently at the end of the fence. Its glossy hide was stained with alkali and sweat, but the animal's head was still up.

"Yuh owe it to Paint, not me." The outlaw smiled. "He nearly ran out from under me on the way here. But here comes yore mother."

Mrs. Wiggin had hastily dressed and was coming toward them. She was still trembling, but not so white, and she managed to smile.

"Didn't I tell you boys that Sonny was square—and our friend?" she said, with a little hint of triumph in her voice.

"Yuh shore did, mom!" Stan grinned sheepishly. "Yuh was right, like yuh always are."

The old rancher stared at the queerly crumpled body of Pascal, a mixture of emotions on his leathery face.

"He shore was crafty," he muttered. "He even chose a time when

Lusk was away to town to do his dirty work. He thought he'd have it easy."

"Lusk isn't in town," Sonny said quietly. "He's dead. I shot him."

"What?"

The Wiggins listened in amazement while Sonny told the whole story of Lusk's treachery. They were shocked beyond measure, except Mrs. Wiggin, who had never liked Lusk, and who had always rather distrusted him.

"Yuh've done a lot fer us, Sonny," Fred blurted. "When I think of how I tried to kill yuh, I feel like kickin' myself into the corral."

"It's a good thing that happened, amigo," Sonny chuckled. "Because it was that gun of yores I used on Lusk."

The Broken Gun hombres had run out of the house without their boots and were in their sock feet.

"Well, I reckon we'd better go in and git our boots on," Jess laughed. "When I think of how near we come to dyin' with 'em off——"

"Wait, dad!" snapped Stan. "Yere comes somebody. It looks like——"

A rider was loping toward the ranch house from the south, well dressed in a light Stetson, white shirt, black coat and breeches, and astride a thoroughbred horse.

"It's Will Hanley!" ejaculated Jess Wiggin.

"He's goin' to be glad when he sees Pascal and the others." Stan grinned. "He'll be plenty surprised, too."

"Yes, I think he will," Sonny murmured softly.

The owner of the EX Connected had suddenly halted, like a man bewildered, and seemed about to turn his cayuse. Until then, he had not seen the little knot of men standing by the body of Pascal, the fence having obscured his view.

"Come right on, Hanley!" invited Sonny crisply, his hand dropping carelessly over the butt of one holstered gun.

Hanley approached slowly, then halted again. There was a queer look on his handsome face.

"Yuh didn't expect to see Sonny Tabor here, eh, Will?" Jess guffawed. "Well, it's all right, let me tell yuh! He's saved us all. Pascal, yere, is as dead as a doornail, and so's the others. He——"

"Get down off yore bronc, Hanley!" Sonny Tabor cut in, his voice as sharp as a skinning knife.

The Wiggins stared at him in surprise and silence. The EX Connected boss had turned a dirty gray, and the muscles of his face had begun to twitch. He glared back at Sonny for a moment, then averted his eyes. Slowly he crawled from his cayuse.

"I—I'm shore glad to see——" he began jerkily.

"Yo're a liar, Hanley!" the outlaw crackled. "This is the biggest disappointment of yore life. It didn't work, did it, Hanley?"

"W-w-what do yuh mean?" the wealthy rancher stammered.

"Yes, Tabor, what's the idea of insultin' my friend this a way?" old Jess Wiggin protested.

"Yuh just thought he was yore friend," said Sonny grimly. "He was the brains behind the whole mess. He hired Pascal and his men, and he hired Lusk!"

An oath came whistling from Hanley's blue lips. "Yuh don't know what yo're talkin' about, yuh blasted——"

"Oh, yes, I do," said the outlaw mildly. "Yuh wanted the Wiggin ranch, and yuh wanted to get it as cheap as dirt. Yuh thought yuh

could scare 'em into sellin' out to yuh if yuh could make it tough enough. When that didn't work, yuh wanted 'em got out of the way."

Beads of sweat stood out on Hanley's forehead; his eyes were dilated with anger and fear.

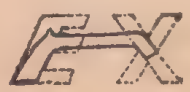
"Are yuh goin' to let this whelp stand thar and talk to me like thet, Jess?" he demanded.

Jess Wiggin was silent; he was thinking things over—thinking hard.

"Mr. Wiggin," Sonny drawled, "yuh wanted to know where all yore calves went. I'll show yuh. Here's yore brand—the Broken Gun."

With the toe of his boot, Sonny made the following mark in the sand:

"And this is how yuh blotted it into yore own EX Connected burn, Hanley," said the outlaw pleasantly. "My drawin' is kind o' sketchy, of course; but then, I'm not an expert like you."



Jess Wiggin made a rumbling sound in his throat, and his two sons turned livid with fury. It was convincing enough for them, even though guilt hadn't been stamped upon Hanley's twitching face.

"Got anything to say—or do, Hanley?" Sonny Tabor asked coldly.

"Yes, you—you young whippersnapper! Yuh ruined all my plans, but I'll pay——"

"Look out, Sonny!" yelled Fred.

The warning wasn't necessary. Hanley's draw was dazzlingly fast, but the outlaw's was a split second quicker. The EX Connected owner just managed to get his silver-mounted gun from its holster, and that was all.

There was a crash, a lurid streak of flame, and a scarf of acrid smoke from Sonny's big .45. A queer expression twisted Hanley's face. Fumbling blindly at his chest, he fell forward. The outlaw's bullet had pierced his heart.

Sonny reholstered his gun. For a long minute, all of them stood looking in silence at all that was left of Hanley. Then they turned away in relief.

"Sonny!" Mrs. Wiggin whispered, at last.

"Yes'm?"

"It was terrible, Sonny, but he forced you to do it. And he deserved it. I never knew that such wicked men could exist in this world. But you've saved us—saved us all. You'll stay with us a while?"

"Yes, Sonny," said Fred earnestly. "And yuh needn't be afraid of the law while yo're yere, either. If the sheriff comes——"

The blue-eyed outlaw glanced over to where Paint was loyally waiting for him.

"Thanks, amigos," he said, with a somber smile. "I'd like to, but Paint and me have to be hittin' the out trail. It's a crime, yuh know, to knowingly shelter a fugitive from justice, and I wouldn't want to get yuh in trouble. Adios, and good luck to yuh!"

"But surely you'll stay long enough to have breakfast with us!" cried Mother Wiggin. "I'm going to make pancakes. Will you have them with honey, or with maple sirup?"

Sonny Tabor heaved a deep sigh—and weakened.

"I'll have 'em, if yuh don't mind, ma'am, with a little of both," he said bashfully.

What The Campers Escaped

A PARTY of government surveyors were in Texas examining tracts of land and collecting agricultural information. While they were there, a fire broke out in a gully, and the surveyors gave valuable help in overcoming it, and preventing the flames from reaching the prairie.

Had this happened, as one of them remarked, the fire might have extended to the arctic circle, or to California, and they could have done nothing, for a high wind was blowing. But they checked the spreading flames and kept the fire in the gully until it was under control.

After the excitement had died down, they went to their camp, changed their clothing, washed their smoke-grimed faces and hands, and attended to their horses. Then they made a big pot of coffee and sat down to enjoy their pipes in peace. Before rolling into their blankets, they made sure that all was safe for the night, and then lay down for a good sleep.

During the night, they heard some strange noises at a distance and were quickly on their feet. They made a careful search, but could discover nothing.

The horses were feeding quietly at their stakes, but the camp dog was uttering low, threatening growls. But as they could find nothing of a disturbing nature, the men returned to their blankets and were soon asleep.

At daylight, as they were preparing for breakfast, a group of men came along. They were well armed and had a small pack of hounds with them. The one who seemed to be the boss came forward and said politely:

"Mornin', gentlemen! Yuh travelin'?"

"Yes, sir," was the reply, "we're starting out right after breakfast."

"Well," said the man, "I swaar yuh came near not travelin' any further last night."

"How so? What happened?" asked the other.

"Well, sir, a week ago I lost my hosses, an' bein' as how I'm a newcomer, I couldn't afford to do without 'em. Late last night I heerd bells an' sent two of my men to see if it wasn't our hosses rangin' back again. Well, sir, they went out an' when they came back, they said they followed 'em by the bells over this way, and had come into a Mexican camp before they knew it. I knew that no Mexicans would be here for any good business. So I got my men together, told 'em to get the dogs, an' I got the guns. Then we set out to see who yuh was.

"When we got here, I tell yuh I didn't like the looks of yuh. We made a fire behind the hill and laid around till daylight, keepin' watch on yuh. An' I'll tell yuh what, if yuh'd 'a' moved around the night, yuh'd 'a' got a few loads o' buckshot in yore stomicks, an' yore travelin' days would 'a' been over. Yo're lucky yuh ain't Mexicans, an' that my hosses ain't here. Hain't seen a pair o' fine gray hosses with a bay mare with 'em, have yuh?"

"No, sir," said the surveyor, "but if we should come across them I'll send them to the trading post. Thank you for waiting until daylight before letting off your buckshot. We certainly had a narrow escape, that time."

Dynamite And Water

By Claude Rister

Author of "Bullet Business," etc.

IN the cold gray of morning, Billy Wells stood and watched his pony die. As the bronc's side ceased to move, and the dark, pitiful eyes glazed, a lump rose in the sturdy puncher's throat.

"Pore little Chico," he mumbled, and then he turned away.

He looked at a gray spread of ashes where once had stood a shack; at another, down by the corral, which marked the one-time location of a feed crib. He thought of the trough from which Chico had drunk late yesterday.

Grimly he strode toward the well, with its old-fashioned housing and oaken bucket. The trough was inside the corral. There was a plank sluiceway for carrying water through the cedar bars and into it.

The rails were so flimsy that they bent under the heavy-set cowboy's weight as he climbed over the fence. For a moment he stood gazing into the half-filled trough, wondering. He noticed now that the wooden plug had been pulled—lay upon the ground.

The drain had filled with moss and down from the cottonwood leaves above, however; so the trough had not emptied. It had been a quarter full when Chico had first rammed his nose into it yesterday.

Billy's gaze roved again. His keen blue eyes found something which they had not seen before. A hun-

dred yards beyond the small corral lay three brown hummocks. He hastened to investigate.

Billy found two old nags and a milk cow. They had been dead for about two days, he judged. As he stood there gazing somberly at the carcasses he silently reasoned:

"A homesteader's place. Somebody burned him out and poisoned his stock. Before leavin' he pulled the plug to let the poisoned water escape, but moss and cottonwood fuzz drifted into the drain and stopped her up. Chico drank some of that water before I drawed fresh from the well. Looks like there's trouble between ranchers and nesters around here. Maybe that's why my old saddle pal, Moon Dawson, wrote me to join up with him."

Billy Wells had arrived at the site just at deep dusk, the day before. Being weary from a long ride he had turned in immediately after caring for his mount, and eating a frugal supper. The fresh water which he had pumped into the trough had diluted the poison so that Chico had lived through the night.

The cowboy returned to his dead pony. He squatted on his spurred heels and stroked the bay's body.

"Pore little Chico," he said again, and then as his blue eyes glinted: "The skunk who poisoned that water ought to be shot!"

He was thoughtful for a moment; then he got up and went bow-legging along a brown ribbon of trail which led away toward the east, walking awkwardly in his high-heeled boots. He hated walking as every cowboy does, but there was nothing else for it. He must leave his equipment behind and hike until he reached some place where he could procure a mount or a lift.

He had traveled about a mile, when he saw a wisp of pale-blue smoke rising from a clump of cottonwood trees. His spirits rose. Some one was camped down there. Pretty lucky, this contacting somebody so soon.

He quickened his pace, eager to meet the person or persons down there. He carried his rifle on his arm.

The sun was just a little way off the horizon. Billy had got up very early that morning. He was within a hundred yards of the clump of cottonwoods, when suddenly gunfire broke out. Two six-guns were banging, shattering the solemn stillness of the early morning.

Billy Wells jerked to a stop. A bullet droned past him. Another slapped a rock a short distance away. A spurt of dust showed that a third had fallen short by twenty yards.

The sandy-haired waddy's square-jawed face went red. "Dry-gulchers!" he muttered. "The skunks who poisoned the water, maybe!"

Billy Wells usually was reckless to the point of foolhardiness when thoroughly angry, and he was as mad as a hornet now. Swinging his .30-30 Winchester to his right hip the waddy charged, pumping lead through a thicket and into the cottonwood grove as he zigzagged along.

He tore out of the brush and onto the edge of a little clearing, then halted. Looking through the stand of cottonwood trunks he glimpsed a rider just flitting out of sight into a wooded dip.

A short distance away stood a rickety wagon, with a dingy canopy. Tied to its back end was a milk cow. Near by smoldered a dying camp fire. Utensils were scattered about.

The cowboy's eyes grew wider as

they found a human form sprawled face downward in the grass at the top of a short slope, a little distance from a crystal spring. An old flop hat had fallen away, leaving exposed a mop of long, unkempt hair.

Two ugly splotches on the faded hickory shirt showed that the man had been shot twice in the back.

Billy ran to the aged stranger and turned him over. The tobacco-stained beard moved. The old-timer moaned and opened pale-blue eyes.

"You got me, you—you inhuman devils!" the man gasped.

"I didn't shoot you, pop. Last night I camped at a burned-out homestead a mile from here. My pony drank some poisoned water, and he died this morning. I saw your smoke and headed this way. Then somebody started shootin' at me. I charged, shootin' with my Winchester as I ran. Saw a rider disappear into the hollow over there to the south. What happened here?"

"I come into this country to homestead. Was warned agin' it by a sod-buster I met in Kiowa. Said he'd been burnt out and his stock poisoned. That was his place where you camped last night. He got a nester friend to haul his belongin's away.

"But I come on. Was jest breaking camp when a man rode up. Ordered me to head back where I'd come from. I told him I wouldn't, then he started shootin'. When I saw him reach for his gun I started runnin'. Fired back twice, but missed. Never was much of a shot. He got me in the back. Nobody was shootin' at you, cowboy. Just happened you was in the path of the bullets that missed me."

Billy Wells's sun-reddened face was hard. The wisp of sandy hair that stuck out from under his battered Stetson in front seemed to bristle. "What'd the gunner look like?"

"Couldn't see his face. Masked by his scarf. Reckon he was one of the Bucket T riders, though. They say them two partners, Brad Bullock and Hal Marengo, have swore they'd rid the range of squatters. The man who shot me skeedaddled when your bullets begin snippin' through the bresh."

Billy examined the wounds. "Happens they're both through the shoulder blades. Reckon they won't prove fatal, provided a doc gets at 'em soon. I'll do what I can for 'em, then——"

"Take me to my brother's place, ten mile below here. I'll direct you there. He'll send his boy for the sawbones."

Billy Wells dressed the wounds to the best of his ability, then working carefully, he got the gray-whiskered, long-haired old sod-buster into the run-down wagon. The team—a pair of rawboned nags—were hobbled beside the stream that issued from the spring. He brought them and hitched them up.

When everything was loaded, he drove to the devastated homestead, got his own equipment, then he set out for the home of the wounded man's brother.

He had driven to within three miles of the place when he saw three riders break out of the scrub timber to the left and come loping leisurely to cut his trail. Billy's wide mouth tightened.

"Looks like trouble, dad," he spoke in a low tone. "Here come three men."

He eased around in the seat so that his six-gun hung free, and he adjusted the weapon to a position for a quick draw.

The three riders barred the trail. Billy drove up to them, and the two aged nags halted of their own accord. For a moment, not a word was said. Billy sat hunched, squinting nonchalantly from under reddish brows. The three rock-faced horsemen stared back grimly.

The one in the middle was as straight as a rifle barrel. His face was thin. The nose was long, almost bridgeless, flat at the end. It reminded Billy of an inverted "T." A lantern jaw hung below the tight mouth. The eyes were almost white. The two men flanking him were both undersized, and blond.

The tall man grunted contemptuously. "Another squatter, huh?"

He could not see the riding equipment back in the wagon, and the cowboy's boots and spurs were below the level of the dashboard. Billy had been out of work for some time, and his clothing was rather faded and worn. There was a rawhide thong laced into the brim of his wreck of a Stetson. He rubbed the sandy stubble on his chin, wrinkled his forehead, and grinned faintly in mild amusement.

That smile riled the stiff-backed gunman. The next words that came from between the bitter lips sounded dangerous:

"Turn around and get goin', sod-buster. You ain't settling in this valley. Pull your freight."

Billy Wells straightened up in the seat. "Out of the trail, gunnie!" he snapped. "I'm already past due at the place I'm headin' fer."

The white eyes went icy. The man bit out: "Last chance. Turn them crowbaits around and drive, or I'll——"

"Get up, hosses!" Billy slapped them gently with the lines. They started to move. The tall rider spat out an oath and cut for his gun.

II.

Billy Wells had been well prepared for such a move. As he had sat holding the lines, his brown right hand had rested within an inch of his gun butt. Now the Colt was in his hand and leveled.

It seemed that none of the gunmen knew how it had got there. They blinked. The tall rider's weapon froze, half out of its holster; then slid back deep into the leather.

Neither of the other men had made a move to draw, doubtless believing that their leader could easily take care of the situation.

Billy's voice cracked out: "Now I'm telling *you* hombres to get goin'. Ride straight south. I can see farther that way. Git!"

The hammer of the .45 clicked. Without a word, the three men turned their mounts and went loping away. Now and then they turned in their saddles and looked back. Billy Wells was grinning broadly as he urged the two nags to a trot.

"That took nerve, cowboy!" came the old-timer's voice from under the wagon cover.

"Not much. You see, thinkin' me a sod-buster, they figured I couldn't draw. So that straight-backed jigger was taking his time about unshuckin' his iron. Did you get a look at 'em?"

"Yes."

"Think either of 'em was the jasper who shot you?"

"I'm plumb shore neither of 'em was the man."

Billy Wells left the wounded man in the hands of the old fellow's brother, and set out for "Moon" Dawson's homestead on a borrowed horse.

When he arrived at the place, no

one was at home. His old saddle pal had just settled here. There was a brand-new shack, meagerly furnished, and a half-built corral. Other than these things, there were no improvements. Billy set himself up and awaited his friend's return.

He was sprawled on a bunk, thinking things over and smoking a cigarette when he heard a thumping of hoofs. "There's Moon now," he told himself as he swung his booted feet to the floor.

But when he reached the front door he received an unpleasant surprise. The rider who was approaching the shack was not his friend, but the mule-faced jasper with whom he had tangled on the trail earlier in the day.

The man came up and stopped. He seemed surprised to find Billy there. For a moment he just stared, and then he grunted: "Ugh! And so you're the feller who has squatted here!"

"I aim to be one of 'em. My old side kick, Moon Dawson, took up the land, then wrote me to come and join him. Reckon I'll file on a piece adjoinin', and we'll throw in together."

The cowboy's gaze dropped to the horse's left shoulder. He saw that the animal wore the Bucket T brand.

Understanding the glance, the man said in his peculiarly hard voice: "You read her right, hombre; I'm Ab Lash, ridin' for Bullock and Marengo. They heard somebody'd squatted down here, and sent me with a get-out order." The frosty eyes narrowed curiously. "Little surprised to find that you're a cowman—not the usual run of clodhopper squatter."

"I reckon it ain't the first surprise you've had to-day."

The taunt behind the words made the long face stiffen, the mouth beneath the T-shaped nose pinch hard. The fellow said in a voice that had become as harsh as a raking of sandpaper:

"You took me by surprise, all right, cowboy; that's why you outdrawed me. This time it's going to be different."

And then, without warning, his right hand was racing for his gun.

He had the jump on Billy. As this realization shot through the square-built puncher's brain, he jerked himself down and aside, while fanning for his Colt.

Despite his slight advantage at the start, the lean gunman's weapon did not speak until a slug from Billy's gun was drilling into his right shoulder. As the pistol bucked, it flew from his grasp. His bullet slammed into the wall of the shack, three feet above the hunkered cowboy's sandy thatch.

The fellow rocked back in his saddle. The sorrel horse snorted and pivoted. The rider quickly controlled the animal. He turned slowly; sat his mount, right hand pressed to the wound, and stared for a moment in his unblinking, expressionless way. Then he said:

"You're too good for me, cowboy. I'm ready to ride. Can I get my cutter?"

"Go ahead; I don't need it."

The fellow picked up the weapon, then remounted. "Yeah, you're too fast for me," he said. "But Hal Marengo can take care of you. You kin expect a call from him soon, rannihan."

He wheeled, jabbed his mount with the spurs, and went clattering away.

"I guess I've played it," muttered Billy Wells, frowning and punching a smoking cartridge from his Colt.

"It'll mean plenty trouble for me and my pal from now on."

His head jerked up. Hoofbeats from another direction! Quickly he shoved a cartridge into the empty chamber, then thumbed down the loading gate. Another rider was coming. But the next instant his tension left him. He had recognized his pal, Moon Dawson.

There were swift, happy greetings between the cowboys, and then Dawson's manner became anxious. He was a short, duck-legged cowpoke with a round face and baby-blue eyes.

"That looks like Ab Lash," he said, gazing along the trail. "I heard shots. What happened?"

Billy explained the whole situation. The sawed-off waddy shook his round head dubiously. "Bad business, podner! The Bucket T has been making it tough for squatters around here. Maybe we'd better pull stakes. Can't fight a big outfit like that."

Billy's mouth was drawn tightly over his teeth as he pulled a brown paper from a tiny folder of tissue sheets. He was thinking of a devastated homestead, his poisoned pony, the back-shot old man, his two clashes with Ab Lash, and the twice-spoken order to get out. He didn't like being shoved around.

"You can pull stakes if you want to," he said evenly. "I aim to stay. Can't find a job right now, no way; so I'll homestead."

"You don't know what you're letting yourself in for."

"I'll stay and find out."

Moon grinned broadly. "I'm with you, podner! Let 'em try to put us on the drift!"

The Bucket T outfit did exactly that. The sun was just setting, and the two cowboys were at supper, when Billy, who was facing a window, announced calmly:

"Here they come, partner; let's get ready to receive 'em."

Rolling along the trail that stretched to the east was a tawny haze of dust. Moon gave it a glance, then kicked back his chair.

"*Bueno*, podner!" he grunted, and the two cowboys went bow-legging for their Winchesters.

When the Bucket T riders dusted to a stop in front of the shack, Billy Wells was standing slouched in the doorway. Moon Dawson was inside, crouched by a window, his rifle in his stubby hands.

There were seven men in the party, but Ab Lash was not one of them. Doubtless, the mule-faced killer had gone to get medical attention.

At the head of the mounted band were two men whom Billy knew, from descriptions given him by his partner, were Brad Bullock and Hal Marengo, owners of the big Bucket T spread.

Bullock was a giant of a man, past middle age, slightly fat, fierce of face. The red hands which rested on the saddle horn were freckled. The tawny eyes beneath the bushy brows were expressionless.

Hal Marengo was athletically built, dark, handsome. The boldly chiseled face was haughty. The glitering black eyes would have been splendid, but for the evil light that played in them.

Billy studied the man keenly. Ab Lash had threatened that Marengo would take care of him. Moon Dawson had anxiously confided that the handsome, dark ranchman was the fastest gunman in that part of the country.

It was big Brad Bullock who spoke first. He shifted his bulk in

the saddle and the leather creaked. "You're the fellow who shot my foreman, huh?"

Billy nodded. "I've heard rumors to that effect," he drawled.

The gunmen exchanged glances. Hal Marengo's black eyes squinted just a little. Brad Bullock showed not a trace of emotion. He took a cigar from a coat pocket, stuck it into a corner of his mouth, and left it there unlighted.

"Salty, huh?" he grunted.

"Enough to fight for my rights."

Bullock wallowed the cigar with his tongue. "Your rights! And you figure you got a right to homestead hereabout?"

"Why not? It's open for settlement, ain't it?"

The tawny eyes glowed slightly. "But it has always been Bucket T range. I won't stand for squatters coming in, and——"

"Always been, did you say? Listen, Bullock, ranchmen haven't been in this country always. The original owners, too, were squatters, only on a larger scale. Range men can't stop the spread of the farmers any more than the Indians could stop the sweep of civilization. Sodbusters and others are sure to come. Every acre of homestead land will be taken up, and since that's the case, I figure I might as well get mine, while the getting's good."

Brad Bullock seemed impressed. He nodded, studied the end of his cigar as if it was something unique.

"You're a smart young fellow, cowboy. Nervy and quick with your gun, too. I'd like to have you work for me."

"No, thanks," Billy declined acidly. "I wouldn't work for a man who has stock poisoned, poor folks' buildings burned, and old men shot in the back."

Bullock's bushy eyebrows lifted, and he looked at his partner. Marengo's face flushed darkly, and the black eyes flamed. This was the first Bullock had heard of the backshooting, Billy guessed.

Moon had told him that Bullock was as hard as rock, as dangerous as a lion, but that he did not believe in underhanded methods. It was Marengo who was behind all the dirty work.

"You're going to get out of here right now!" the dark man snapped. "When your partner comes back, he's going to drift, too!" Evidently the man did not know that Moon had returned from town.

Billy's blue eyes glinted. He straightened up from the doorframe, and his right palm began gently rubbing up and down on his thigh. Between tight lips he said:

"Get this straight, Marengo, me and my partner are here to stay. If you think you can do anythin' about it, there's no need o' waitin'. You might as well cut loose your wolf right now."

It was a daring challenge. Every face out there went harder. Hands tensed, ready to streak for guns. For just an instant, there was a deathly hush, and then——

"Take it easy, everybody! The first gent that makes a gun move, gets his light blasted out."

Eyes flicked to an open window, saw a rifle barrel protruding over the sill. It's muzzle was pointed straight at the heart of Hal Marengo. Another silence, and then Billy Wells's six-gun magically was in his right hand and pointing.

"Get going!" he barked.

A moment's hesitation. Bullock tongued his cigar again. His eyes were squinted. A peculiar ghost of a smile flickered about his lips.

"It's a shame to have to kill men

like you two," he said, and then he turned his horse.

The five gun waddies followed him immediately. Marengo remained long enough to say to Billy:

"I'll be seeing you again, cowboy!" And there was a world of meaning in his tone.

As the cavalcade moved away down the trail, Billy looked after the outfit and spoke musingly: "Yeah, me and you will meet again I reckon, Marengo. I wonder which will win in the shoot-out."

"I'd just about as soon tangle with lightning," confessed Moon Dawson. "He's a deadly gunner, and he's got cold nerve."

III.

Much to the pards' surprise, days rolled by without their experiencing any further trouble with the Bucket T outfit. Billy filed on a piece of land adjoining Moon's. They finished their improvements, put in a crop, borrowed money from friends back home, and bought some scrub cattle, paying part down and giving a mortgage for the balance.

Hal Marengo's threat to shoot it out with Billy Wells had not materialized. When they occasionally met, the dark ranchman completely ignored Billy, although it was plain to every one that he hated the cowboy.

"I reckon we showed 'em, eh, podner?" Moon Dawson exulted one day.

Billy frowned and shook his head doubtfully. "I don't know about that. We won too easy. I don't like the situation, none whatever."

But as the period of peaceful quiet extended into months, Billy's fears gradually disappeared. Then it happened!

The partners' water supply was a tiny, spring-fed creek that coursed along within Bucket T range, swung out into their own, and then turned back into the Bullock-Marengo territory again. Down along this horseshoe bend they had a nice crop of alfalfa growing.

Their uneasiness was first renewed when the Bucket T outfit ran a strong, four-wire fence between its range and that of the two homesteaders.

"Now why you reckon they're doing that?" asked Moon Dawson. "Usually it's squatters who fence, not cow barons."

"Dunno," answered Billy. "It don't look good to me. They've got something up their sleeves. I reckon now we're going to find out why they've left us undisturbed so long."

And they did.

Brad Bullock, Hal Marengo, and the lantern-jawed Ab Lash came over to the little place one day. The trio rode leisurely about, inspecting everything, before they approached the house.

The partners watched them uneasily, wonderingly. The two were squatted on their spurs against the front wall, smoking cigarettes, when the three riders came up.

Brad Bullock took an unlighted cigar from his mouth, inspected its dry end, and remarked casually:

"Right nice layout you boys have built up here. Good crop of alfalfa, stanch little buildings, small but useful corral, few head of stock in prime shape."

Billy merely nodded as he pulled at a cigarette. His blue eyes were squinted and hard.

Sawed-off Moon Dawson broke out with: "So what?"

Bullock's red, bushy eyebrows went up in an expression of faint amusement. "Scrub cattle ain't

worth anything to me; I'd have to market 'em pronto as beef. I could use the alfalfa, though, and this little layout would make a dandy brandin' camp."

The partners rose together. Moon snapped shut and pocketed a knife. Billy's cigarette fell from his fingers.

"Meanin'?" he gritted in a voice that was freighted with menace.

"I like you two boys; you've got what it takes. Still would like to have you riding for the Bucket T. If you'll drop this homestead idea and join my crew I'll buy stock, improvements, and alfalfa crop—sa-ay, for——" He named a ridiculously low price, then squinted at them shrewdly.

Moon Dawson looked amazed. Billy Wells's face went red. Once more the wisp of sandy hair which protruded from beneath his battered hat seemed to bristle.

"I don't know what your game is," he said slowly, "but if you go ahead with it, somebody's apt to get shot."

Bullock smiled mysteriously, stuck the unlighted cigar into his big mouth, and turned his horse. "Think it over," he said. "When you're ready to meet my terms, come to the Bucket T."

Ab Lash was grinning as he followed the big boss. There was a sneer on Hal Marengo's lips; devilish lights in his black eyes.

"I'll be seein' you again, Wells," he promised a second time.

When the three riders had gone, the partners looked at each other for a moment in silence, and then Moon asked: "What does it mean?"

Billy shook his head. His square-cut face was hard. Ghosts of anxiety were flitting through the chambers of his heart.

"We'll just have to wait and find out," he said.

They didn't have long to wait.

They had left outside their field inclosure a rather large, but shallow water hole, formed by the spring-fed stream as it made its horseshoe bend into their property. Three days later, they noticed their cattle, bunched and wandering about this place, bawling as if in want of water.

"That's queer," said Moon.

Through Billy's mind leaped remembrance of dead stock he had seen at the devastated homestead, ten miles away, of his own pet pony breathing its last.

"Come on, let's have a look-see!" the sturdy cowpoke clipped.

To their amazement, they found the shallow, gravel-bottomed hole dry. The silvery stream had disappeared. Again they looked at each other silently.

Half a dozen gun waddies came slouching out of the brush on the Bucket T side of the line. They were trying to look unconcerned, but they could not entirely conceal their amusement.

"Your hay looks like it could stand a little irrigatin'," remarked one of the men.

Billy Wells's eyes were blue jade. "All right, come on!" he snapped. "What does it mean?"

The leader of the gang picked his teeth with a sharpened match stem for a moment, then drawled: "Well, you see Bullock and Marengo figured the crick was losin' too much time meanderin' over yore way; so they built a dam, cut a new channel, and now the water runs straight instead of making this here horseshoe bend."

Moon Dawson began swearing wildly. Billy Wells just stood rigid and silent. He was pale around the

mouth. The lips seemed frost-ringed.

In his wild rage, Moon made a play for his gun, but Billy grabbed his arm.

"These men are only hired hands. Bullock and Marengo are the jaspers we want to see. Come on!"

The gang leader called after them: "Bullock said tell you boys he'd decided he couldn't use you at the ranch, but that the offer for the homestead stands—provided you agree to leave the country."

Back at the shack, Billy started making warlike preparations. "Now what?" asked his pal.

"I'm goin' to see Bullock and Marengo, like I said. They'll have their men blow that dam and fill the new cut, or I'll shoot them so full of lead——"

"Loco! That's just what they want us to do—come foggin' to their place, r'arin' to shoot! It'll give 'em an excuse for killin' us, and then——"

Billy glared at him. "Are you with me or not?" he snarled.

"Why—er—yes; of course I am, but——"

"Then let's go!"

IV.

Evidently Bullock and Marengo had been expecting them. The two men came out onto the front porch of the sprawling ranch house as the partners rode up.

"Well," remarked Bullock, "I see you've come to talk turkey."

Without warning, the two homesteaders flashed their guns and covered the ranchmen. Billy Wells snapped:

"You coyotes are coming along with us. You'll give orders to your gunnies down there tc guard against our cutting your fence that they're to turn the creek back into its original channel."

Big Brad Bullock took out a fat cigar, bit off an end, and chuckled. Hal Marengo's cruelly handsome face creased in a devilish smile.

"All right, boys," he called, but not in agreement to what Billy Wells had said.

Instantly gun barrels were sliding over sills, past window and door frames and house corners. The place was a regular armed fort. Billy found himself within a cold grip of anxiety. He expected any instant to feel hot lead come tearing into his body.

Bullock's hooded eyes inspected an end of his cigar. "You two can put up those six-guns now."

Disobedience would have been foolish. Slowly they holstered their .45s.

"I've reconsidered my offer for your place," the freckled giant went on. "My price now is just half what it was. Ready to sign?"

"Not on your life!" Billy rapped out. "You can shoot us to ribbons, but——"

"Then good day, gents! We folks have work to do. Come around when you're ready to give in—only don't wait too long. I'm beginning to think already, that maybe even my latest offer is too steep."

As the homesteaders whirled their mounts, Hal Marengo called out: "I'll be seeing you on that little personal matter, Wells, after you two have sold to us."

Once more within their shack, the two waddies paced like caged animals. Moon Dawson kept muttering cuss words. Billy Wells was silent. He was thinking grimly. After a while, he stopped and inquired:

"What's the source of that water supply, Moon?"

"She springs from a cave, up in the hills on Bucket T range."

Billy's eyes gleamed frostily. "Yeah? Well, I got a hankerin' to see that cave, partner. Lead me to it."

They slipped over onto Bucket T territory unobserved, and Moon guided his pal to the cave. They dismounted and went into it, carrying lighted lanterns.

The tiny stream ran like a thread of silver, over solid rock. Now and then the footfalls of the intruders echoed hollowly.

"The whole place is honeycombed," Moon explained. "The holler sounds are caused by us trampin' over underneath tunnels."

Billy's smile was almost as devilish as that of Hal Marengo. "A well-placed charge of dynamite would send that stream of water plunging into some underground channel, eh, partner?"

Moon halted short, stared at his friend. "Why, yeah, I guess so! But Billy, we couldn't do a thing like that! Think of the stock! It's them that'd suffer, not Bullock and Marengo!"

"Come on, let's get out of here!" snarled Billy Wells. "I've seen enough! Of course, we wouldn't stop the stream and cause a lot of innocent brutes to die, but maybe we can make Bullock and Marengo think we would."

Moon whacked a leg of his chaps and exclaimed: "By gannies, podner, it might work!"

"Anyway, it's a chance, apparently the only one we've got."

Eight o'clock that night found the two waddies peering from cover on a slope a quarter of a mile from the Bucket T ranch buildings.

"Looks peaceful enough," whispered Moon Dawson.

"So does a sleepin' tiger," growled Billy Wells. "But we got to chance it. Come on, and remember your part of the play."

They rode cautiously along through the scrub timber, and right up to the back of the main ranch house. Quitting their mounts there they slipped around toward the front.

There was a light in the front room, and they could hear a droning of voices. The window shades were drawn, but they were able to see through a narrow crack at the bottom of one.

Brad Bullock, Hal Marengo, and the mule-faced Ab Lash were seated at a table, on which stood a quart bottle and three glasses. The spying cowboys could distinguish no word of what was being said, but it was obvious that some important subject was being discussed. The faces of the three showed the deepest interest.

The partners turned and looked toward the bunk house. It was lighted, but they saw no one. Billy nodded to his pal, and they stole on to the front door. There they paused for a moment. Billy placed his lips against his friend's right ear and whispered:

"Remember, you keep your gun trained on the bunk house, ready to turn back a rush; also keep one eye cocked through the doorway and help me out with a slug or two if shootin' starts."

Moon nodded. Billy stepped quickly forward, threw open the door and sprang into the room, a gun clutched in his right hand.

"Freeze, everybody!" he barked.

The three plotters sat like wooden images, staring at him. Billy slunk swiftly forward, gun still covering them, and stopped a few feet from the table. He thrust out his jaw.

His teeth and his eyes gleamed in the lamplight.

"Now," he told the trio, "we'll talk turkey."

Brad Bullock was first to recover his poise. Cautiously he extracted a cigar from a vest pocket and bit off one end.

"Sort of rash, ain't you, cowboy, trying to take the three of us at once?"

"He has a friend there at the door," Hal Marengo warned sharply. "I can see his back. It's Dawson, I reckon."

"Right! We've come to ask you and Bullock to sign an agreement to furnish our little spread with water, and to guarantee us protection against raids of any and all kinds, you two to be penalized if and whenever we lose anything from same. I thought it best to keep you covered until you heard my speech."

There were wild lights in Hal Marengo's black eyes: "A call for help would bring gun waddies swarming out of the bunk house."

"Uh-huh, and a bullet into your gizzard," said Billy.

Bullock tongued his cigar, said calmly: "Even if you could scare us into doing what you want, a document signed under duress is no good in court."

Billy grinned wryly. "Right. But you're goin' to sign this one willin'ly," he said. "You see, we been up to the cave where the stream comes from. We both savvies dynamite. A good blast set off in that cave—well, that'd be the end o' your water."

The two ranchers looked at each other aghast. "He's bluffin'!" snarled Hal Marengo. "An' anyway, they could never reach it to set it off afore we could——"

"Mebbe," drawled Billy Wells, "we don't *have* to reach it. You're mebbe forgettin' that ol' sod-buster I saved after your men plugged him in the back. He's plumb willin' to do me any kind o' favor. If he was a-settin' up there in that cave now, ready to touch off that dynamite, in case we don't show up by ten o'clock——"

"You wouldn't dare do such a thing!" snapped Bullock.

Billy grinned again, mirthlessly. "Try it and see," he said. "We're licked, anyhow, unless you give in. We got nothin' to lose. But *you* are——"

With a bitter oath, Hal Marengo hurled himself sidewise from his chair and drove for his Colt. A bullet from Billy's gun caused his black neckerchief to twitch.

And then the chunky cowboy was forced to swerve his weapon toward Ab Lash, for the stiff-backed foreman, too, was drawing.

Lash was out of his chair, the muzzle of his .45 just rising above the table level, when a slug doubled him at the middle. Another in the face whirled him around and dashed him to the floor.

Billy had leaped with that last shot, and it was well that he had done so. A bullet scorched his back.

He pivoted and swung his Colt toward Marengo. Their guns thundered together. A bullet cut strands of sandy hair from a side of the waddy's head. Marengo, lying propped on one elbow, winced, but tried to fire again. Billy sent two more slugs into him.

A cold shock went through Billy Wells then, as he realized that his gun was empty and that Brad Bullock was yet to be disposed of. He ducked and pivoted on high heels, one hand flying to his cartridge belt.

But he saw that Bullock was leaning against the table. His left hand

was pressed to his right shoulder. Crimson was running out between the fingers. Moon had taken care of the man. The terrific din had kept Billy from hearing his friend's shot.

"Never mind trying to stop the waddies from the bunk house!" Billy snapped at Moon Dawson. "Bullock won't let them harm us, will you Bullock?" The cowboy was grinning fiercely.

The giant wagged his head. "No, I'm licked. I'm taking no chances on that dynamite. If the stream was blown, my cows would die like flies. I'd be ruined. We'll ride into town right now, and I'll fix up that paper you want. Then I'll see a doc."

The partners drew sighs of relief, despite the nearing sound of running feet. "All right," Billy Wells said softly, as he slid his gun back into its holster. "Let's go."

He caught Moon Dawson's eye—and winked. It had been more than a month since he'd so much as seen that old sod-buster whose life he'd saved.

INDIANS AVENGED

A SMALL band of friendly Shawnee Indians had made camp near a stream in Hunt County, Texas, intending to trade with the settlers. Four white outlaws secreted themselves in a cane brake near the camp. Toward evening, they poured a deadly volley into the unsuspecting Indians, killing several of them. They then drove the others away, robbed the camp, and made off with a herd of good ponies.

The story soon leaked out, for the outlaws quarreled over the plunder and were overheard. It was feared that, if these men were not punished promptly, the Shawnees would attack the settlement in revenge for the killing of their companions.

A call was made for all citizens to gather and consider what should be done. It was also decided to invite other counties to join with them, and on the day set, some two hundred men met and voted to bring the murderers to justice.

Men rode out in all directions, and rounded up the outlaws—Ray, White, Mitchell, and Jones.

At the same time, four others were arrested as accomplices and accused of theft, as articles from the Indian camp had been found in their possession.

The four charged with murder were sentenced to hang, and the four charged with theft were ordered to leave the State in ten days. If found after that time, they would be hanged on sight.

On the day set for the hanging, the four men were marched to the scaffold and mounted on a wagon. The other four were made to tie the fatal knot on each one's neck, and at the word given, the four were launched into eternity.

As soon as they were dead, they were cut down and buried on the spot. The four whose trembling hands had tied the knots, hit the trail without delay and were never seen again in that part of the country.

Dogie Cantwell's

1. Two days before Thanksgiving, Dogie Cantwell rode into the near-by cow town and stopped in front of the post office. Smiling to himself, he drew a piece of paper from his pocket and, using his gun butt, tacked it on the bulletin board.

2. Then he mounted and rode away. Hipping around in the saddle, he grinned as he saw a curious crowd begin collecting to read the notice he had tacked up. He knew most of them, but there was one stranger among them, he noticed.

3. As Dogie loped away, he heard the whoops and laughter that greeted his notice of the Bar 6 Thanksgiving party. It wasn't often that the citizens of the cow town got a chance to attend a real party. A good crowd was sure to come.

4. But Dogie had passed out of sight when the stranger whom he had noticed in the crowd hastily crossed the street to his waiting bronc. He was a tough-looking gent, and there was an evil grin on his face as he mounted and rode away.

Thanksgivin'

5 He headed out of town at a gallop, the evil grin still twisting his villainous features. Now and then, he chuckled. "The boss shore ought ter give me a bonus fer this idear," he gloated. "It's the easiest thing I ever seen."

6. Striking the wooded foothills, the tough-looking gent followed dim trails and hidden canyons. And then, at last, he came to a crude shack. As he galloped up, several more tough-looking gents came out to meet him, shouting questions.

7. The leader of the owl-hoot bunch listened to the story of the Bar 6 party. He got the idea immediately. They could raid that party easily. None of the guests would be armed. The gang whooped its approval of the scheme.

8. So on Thanksgiving night, the outlaw bunch took advantage of the Bar 6 invitation and went to the party. Dogie Cantwell met them at the door. He didn't know them, and Pard, his dog, took an instant dislike to them.

9. Dogie trusted Pard's instincts. When he saw that the dog disliked the strangers, his suspicions were aroused. Before grub was served, he watched the men closely. But he failed to notice anything wrong with their actions.

10. Then, while he was talking with Tex Mellen near the door, one of the strangers —he was the outlaw leader, although Dogie didn't know it—passed them on his way out. He said something about seeing that his bronc was all right.

11. Dogie waited a few seconds, then followed the stranger through the door. It was a bright moonlight night and, standing on the ranch-house porch, Dogie saw the stranger fumbling around the saddlebags of one of the horses.

12. His suspicions now fully aroused, Dogie waited till the man had reëntered the house, then went out to investigate. He found loaded six-guns in the strangers' saddlebags. Working swiftly, Dogie unloaded all the guns, then replaced them.

13. Back at the house again, he noticed the other strangers—one by one—go out to their horses. Then the chink cook announced grub pile and everybody sat down. Only one of the strangers had a loaded gun, and Dogie watched him.

14. The outlaws did full justice to the big feed. They waited till it was over before acting. Then the leader suddenly leaped to his feet, whipping out the six-gun he'd hidden in his shirt. His gang followed his example, covering the guests.

15. Dogie had been expecting the move. He, too, had a loaded gun ready. He leaped to his feet, covering the outlaw boss. Their two guns roared, and the boss dropped. Other outlaws' guns clicked on empty shells. Dogie had won.

16. The leader, realizing that he was dying, confessed that he and his bunch were responsible for the rustling in the county. Dogie was congratulated by the sheriff and other ranchers. It was a real Thanksgiving for them.

Next Week: "Dogie Cantwell Works Fast."

Texas Triggers Sling Lead

By Walker Tompkins

Author of "Wanted, Dead—The Texas Triggers," etc.

CHAPTER I.

BANDITS.

THE old stage driver grinned mischievously behind his whiskers as he tooled the Coyoteville coach into the dry wash, through swirling alkali dust so thick he could hardly see the whiffletrees.

The tenderfoot passenger who sat beside him clung to the iron rail of the jouncing seat, and watched the old man's gnarled hands handle the six-horse team.

"Do they really have bandits and rustlers out here in the West, Mr. Wickberg?" inquired Bob Venable, as the rickety old Concord slowed to a walk between rimming shale cliffs. "Or is that just storybook talk for us Easterners to swallow?"

"Grandpa" Wickberg slapped the Colt .44 on his scrawny leg, and spat tobacco juice toward the wagon tongue.

"Do they have bandicks out hyar in Arizona?" he cackled impressively. "Bellerin' bullfrogs, son! See this gun I packs? Thar's six lead teeth in her, Venable. I 'lows tuh kill three desperadoes right hyar in Sundown County, some day!"

Bob Venable, who had come by train from Vermont, stared at the cedar-butted old Colt with new respect. When he had got off the train at Cactus Junction, the day before, he had seen plenty of gun-toting cowboys, Mexicans, and prospectors lounging about the little border town. But being naturally shy among strangers, he had not dared get within close looking distance of a six-gun.

"You mean there are bandits right here in Sundown County?"

Grandpa eyed his passenger keenly, to see how much the young fellow would swallow without doubting his word. Bob Venable was a sharp kid, about six feet tall, around twenty years old, and with a husky build for a city dude out of New England. But the gray suit, felt hat, and tan shoes were out of keeping with the West's idea of a he-man's garb.

"Don't tell me you ain't ever heard o' the three Texas Triggers!" exclaimed the old stage driver in amazement. "Bellerin' bullfrogs! They're the wust bandicks this side o' the Pecos, son. The oldest is only twenty-three, an' his name's Andy. I've seen 'im. Sheriff o' this county, afore he rescued his two brothers, Brad an' Cole, from bein' lynched in Coyoteville. The young fellers—'bout your age—come from Texas an' shot up the town soon as they landed, figgerin' because their brother was the sheriff o' Sundown County that they could pull anything. As 'tis, they're all wanted outlaws now, with bounties on their heads. I aims tuh collect that dinero, so that's why I allus packs this smoke-pole. I kin use her, too!"

Bob Venable studied the Arizona sunset, visible through the draw. Ahead stretched a lonely expanse of desert country, thick with cactus and mesquite and soapweed.

Perhaps the very sun-parched panorama of bad lands before his eyes belonged to him. For Bob Venable had inherited the Wagon-wheel Ranch here in Sundown County. That was what had brought him West.

"These Texas Triggers—are they brave men?" he pursued eagerly. "Like Billy the Kid and the other road agents we read about?"

Grandpa bent a scoffing glance at his passenger.

"Bellerin' bullfrogs! Them three waddies is cowardly skunks, an' that's why they're so dangerous. They ride sorrel hosses named King, Queen, an' Jack. An' when them Texas Triggers sling lead——"

Spang! A gunshot deafened Venable, just as the Concord left the dry wash.

Grandpa Wickberg, the westering sun in his eyes, choked off in mid-word and slumped forward in the stage boot.

With a cry of horror, Bob Venable saw a spreading dark stain between the old man's suspenders, where a rifle bullet had drilled through Wickberg's backbone to kill him instantly.

"Reach fer a cloud, tenderfoot!"

The kid from Vermont cranked his head about in alarm. He saw three riders suddenly spur out from behind a dense thicket of ocotillo cactus and Joshua trees alongside the road. All three rode sorrel horses, and their faces were masked with bandannas. They toted rifles, and one of the Winchesters was smoking.

"The Texas Triggers!" gasped Venable to himself, too dazed to move as he saw the three bandits spur alongside the coach.

The hombre with the smoking rifle shoved it in a saddle sheath and

leaped from the saddle to seize the iron ladder of the stagecoach. He swung into the driver's seat, seizing the lines with one hand while he covered Venable with a Colt .45 with the other.

The second bandit reined in close beside the rattling wheels of the Concord to peer inside and satisfy himself that Wickberg had been carrying no other passengers. The third masked rider galloped ahead to seize the bitt rings of the off lead horse and drag the startled six-horse team to a dusty stop.

Bob Venable shook his head to see if he was in a nightmare. In his nostrils was the biting odor of powder smoke; at his feet quivered the corpse of the man he had been talking with all day. A Colt barrel was rammed in the pit of his stomach.

It seemed too fantastic to be real. And then the tenderfoot's first feeling of shock and surprise gave way to a slow, mounting rage. He returned the slit-eyed gaze of the crook who occupied the seat beside him, leaning forward over Grandpa's body to wrap the lines about the brake handle.

"You shot this man from behind!" protested Venable hotly. "You didn't give him a chance!"

The killer stood up, unwinding six feet of gangling height clad in scuffed batwing chaps, blue hickory shirt, and kangaroo boots. His head was covered with a ten-gallon Stetson.

"I won't give you a chance, either, if yuh don't shut up an' obey orders!" grated the outlaw. "Is yore name Robert Venable?"

The Vermont tenderfoot started upon hearing this masked bandit call him by name. He had supposed they had stopped the coach to rob it of the mail bags.

"Yes, I am!" answered the tenderfoot, his courage returning. "And you three are the Texas Triggers."

With a motion that caught Venable completely by surprise, the masked outlaw holstered his Colt and seized the tenderfoot by the neck with both hands. Lifting the young Easterner erect in the stage boot, he shoved backward and sent him hurtling off the stage.

Crash! Venable's neck would have been snapped by his head-first plunge, had it not been for the cushioning effect of a scrub paloverde which grew alongside the rutted desert road. He smashed through the branches and lay prostrate, his senses fading.

"He's the milk-fed jasper we were after, all right," snarled the crook as he leaped off the stage. "Quick, Injun Jack—git him inside! We got tuh work fast, afore anybody comes. We got tuh make shore Venable don't reach Coyoteville alive!"

The outlaw addressed as "Injun Jack" leaned from his saddle to open the coach door. The boss killer picked up the tenderfoot and dumped him roughly into the coach, which bobbed jerkily on its leather-strap springs.

"O. K., pards! Larrup that team, Bow-laigs, an' get the hosses started toward the Rio Placido bridge. Everybody knows that bridge is in bad repair, so when this stage is found in the canyon with Venable's dead carcass in it, they won't ask no questions."

The masked bandit who had held the team in check slapped the leader with a rawhide quirt. Instantly the frightened team burst into a run, dragging the stagecoach behind it at reckless pace.

Down the curving desert road at breakneck speed the Concord careened and jounced. Not a quarter of a mile ahead was the bridge which

spanned the Rio Placido Canyon—a bridge which the three outlaws had taken care to dynamite earlier in the afternoon.

"That team won't stop short o' kingdom come!" chuckled the boss killer, removing his mask to reveal an evil, leering face set with an eye that had been blinded by a knife years before. "Reckon that takes care o' Robert Venable. He won't live tuh claim his Wagonwheel spread!"

CHAPTER II.

RUNNING GUN FIGHT.

BOB VENABLE came to his senses just as the stagecoach got under way. He pulled himself shakily to a sitting position.

The sunset-painted Arizona landscape was a sickening red blur outside the glassless windows of the old Concord. The coach rocked like a chip in a tempest, battering the dazed tenderfoot's brain and rattling his teeth in his head.

"Those scoundrels!" he panted, lurching over toward the door and peering out. "Where are they taking me, anyhow?"

And then the kid from Vermont got a shock. The three crooks who had murdered Grandpa Wickberg were not riding on it, nor galloping along beside it. Bob Venable could see the three desperadoes standing by the draw which still smoked with the dust of the stage's passage!

A tremor of alarm coursed through Venable as he realized that he was in a runaway stagecoach. He leaned out of the door as far as possible, then shuddered as he saw a waving arm dangling over the edge of the boot—an arm with crimson drops spilling from each of the finger tips.

"If I own a ranch in this county, I'll be darned if I'm going to stand for the sheriff of that county being a—a bandit!" declared Venable. "The Texas Triggers ought to be prosecuted and——"

The stage nearly tipped over as it rounded a curve, dumping Venable into the opposite seat. He scrambled up, gasping.

"Gosh!" he panted. "I've got to try and stop that team before they wreck this wagon!"

But he soon saw that it would be impossible to get outside the stage safely. To open the doors on either side would require a delicate bit of acrobatics to avoid being hurled between the blurring wheels of the Concord. The slightest slip would mean instant death, and in his dazed condition a slip would be inevitable with the stagecoach bouncing across the bad lands like a can tied to a dog's tail.

"Oh, well, the horses will run themselves out," decided the tenderfoot. "I'll hang tight and——"

He squinted out a forward window, and his veins froze.

Down the road, not fifty yards away, yawned a vast open gulf in the wastelands—a canyon which snaked through the flat, cactus-dotted desert. With a start, Venable realized that he was headed straight for the vast gorge of the Rio Placido, which he knew angled across one corner of Sundown County.

But it was not the blue depths of the canyon which congealed the Vermonter's heart with terror. It was the sight of a gaping break midway across the rickety bridge onto which the panic-stricken team would carry the stagecoach!

Sweat broke out on his face as he glanced frantically about. He would have to risk breaking his neck getting out, now.

A sharp yell and a rattle of hoofbeats on rock caused the wild-eyed

victim inside the bouncing Concord to stare out the opposite door. He was startled to see a lanky horseman galloping alongside at top speed.

The stampeding stage team was traveling recklessly, threatening at any instant to carry the coach off the ruts and wreck it. But the powerful sorrel mustang of the lone rider was easily keeping the pace.

"A real cowboy!" thought Venable, forgetting his peril for the moment in the thrilling spectacle of a born horseman spurring his magnificent white-stockinged bronc through the boulders and brush, slanted forward over the pommel, wind whipping his sombrero brim and bannering the flying mane and tail of his horse.

The cowboy was dressed in blue in every detail of his range costume —Stetson, silk neckerchief, rodeo shirt, buckskin vest, bibless overalls, and spurred, high-heeled boots. Venable saw the sunlight sparking off blue-butted six-guns holstered from double cartridge belts about the rider's middle.

Reining close alongside the stage, the rider yelled:

"Open that door an' jump! I can't stop that team!"

Bob Venable swung open the door next the rider, noting as he did so that the horses had nearly reached the bridge. Seconds more and it would be too late.

Raw fear clawed at the tenderfoot, but he averted his eyes from the spinning wheels between which he must jump. Gripping each side of the door, he shut his eyes and leaped toward the outstretched arms of the speeding horseman.

Powerful hands caught his armpits. Mighty muscles swung him out between the deadly wheels and jackknifed him over a horse's withers. Then the hombre was reining to the right and skidding to a halt on the very brink of the canyon.

With an ear-shattering rumble the speeding stage swept out on the damaged bridge. Too late, the lather-sided, wild-eyed horses saw the yawning chasm before their pounding hoofs.

Bob Venable, opening his eyes to stare between the ears of his rescuer's horse, felt a shudder of horror rack his frame as the six-horse team shot out into space, the stage behind it.

The corpse of Grandpa Wickberg sailed off to one side. Mail bags and Venable's trunk flew in all directions. Stage and team dwindled toward the bottom of the river gorge, to smash terribly among the rocks. Seconds later, the sickening roar of thudding horseflesh and splintering wood reached their ears.

"Whew! That was a narrow escape!" panted his rescuer, swinging Venable around with a steel-muscled arm to seat him astride the horse behind the saddle cantle. "Lucky I happened tuh be ridin' near by an' seen you inside o' that stage, hombre!"

The Westerner twisted in his saddle, hooked one lanky knee over the horn, and regarded the tenderfoot. Venable saw a pair of laughing ice-blue eyes, a handsome face that was cured to the color of bridle reins by desert suns and winds, and a firm mouth that indicated sterling character.

"I—— Words are useless to thank you with, sir," stammered Venable, in embarrassment. "You risked your life to save mine."

The cowboy grinned and loosened the chin cord of his sombrero.

"Fergit it, amigo. What's yore name, an' how come the stage driver wasn't on the job? Was he drunk or——"

Before Venable could reply, something whined sharply past their ears like an angry hornet.

The cowboy wheeled his horse, nearly unseating the tenderfoot. Six-guns appeared magically in his bronzed hands.

"That thar noise was a bullet, son!" clipped the waddy over his shoulder. "An' I see three hombres foggin' our direction, honin' fer trouble. Reckon we'll run for it. No use riskin' yore hide against triple odds. Hang on tuh my shell belts, stranger—you an' me are goin' tuh ride!"

The cow-puncher rolled his spurs gently across the big black's flanks, and it seemed to the tenderfoot that the horse took wings and flew, so easy was the motion of running over the uneven desert ground at bewildering speed.

Behind them, Venable got a glimpse of the three bandits spurring in disgruntled pursuit. White puffs jetted from rifles, to be followed by the angry whine of .30-30 slugs, dangerously close.

"They held up the stage!" the tenderfoot called, cheek to the cowboy's back. "They're the—the—Texas—Triggers!"

The rider reined abruptly toward the rim of Rio Placido's dizzy canyon, seemingly about to dive his horse out into space. But a ledge trail opened magically under flying hoofs, and they shot down out of sight of the pursuing gunmen.

"Texas Triggers on the prod ag'in, eh?" grunted the blue-clad waddy. "Waal, we'll outrun 'em afore they git in rifle range ag'in."

After fifteen minutes of a kind of riding which seemed to lift the very stomach out of Venable's body, so steep was the trail down the shadowy gorge, the powerful horse carried them out across a grassy meadow, rounded a bend in the cliffs and came in view of a little log cabin from the chimney of which curled a wisp of blue smoke. The Rio Placido hugged the opposite cliffs, across the meadow.

"Reckon them three jiggers was afraid tuh foller us down that trail," grunted the cowboy. "No sign of pursuit, anyhow."

Dusk was thickening as Bob Venable and his rescuer halted and dismounted in front of the cabin. Two young cow-punchers in chaps and brightly colored shirts got up from the job of mending saddle gear by the doorway and came forward. Venable saw that one was red-headed, the other light blond.

"Brought a friend fer supper, eh?" greeted the blond, with a cordial smile toward the shaken-up young tenderfoot. "Howdy, stranger! Welcome tuh our shanty!"

Venable shook hands in confusion. Events had happened so rapidly since the shot which had killed the stage driver that he had not been able to collect his wits as yet.

"Uh—pleased to meet you," he panted. "My name's Bob Venable. This—your friend here just got through saving my life."

The tall cowboy ran his bridle reins through his bronzed, rope-calloused hands and grinned broadly.

"Venable, meet my brothers, Brad an' Cole. I'm Andy. The three of us is better known locally as the Texas Triggers!"

CHAPTER III.

EXPLANATIONS.

A HOT tide of embarrassment and surprise went through Bob Venable as he stared from one to the other of the tall young Texans before him. Grandpa Wickberg had told him that these three friendly

brothers were the most cowardly and dangerous bad men on the border.

"Why—I—I—that is, I was under the impression that the three men who held up the stagecoach were the Texas Triggers," faltered Venable lamely. "I—I hope you'll excuse——"

His eyes opened wider as he caught sight of the nickel-plated stars pinned to the hatbands of all three. Andy, the waddy who had rescued him from the stage and whose horse had won the race from the three bandits, wore the sheriff's badge. Brad and Cole each wore a star bearing the words "Deputy Sheriff."

The tenderfoot felt foolish, and not a little uneasy. If he was really in the hide-out of Arizona's most "wanted" bad men, perhaps he had jumped from the frying pan into the fire. Death in a falling stagecoach would have been speedy and complete. No telling what torture three criminals could inflict.

"Don't let a case o' mistaken identity worry yuh, Venable!" chuckled Andy Trigger, removing his dusty Stetson to mop a shock of black hair. "Go in the cabin yonder an' wash up. You've been through enough tuh jolt anybody's nerves, this evenin'!"

Frowning with bewilderment, Bob Venable allowed himself to be led inside the log shack. It was almost empty of furniture, but there were three bed rolls spread on the floor, and a stock of canned food and other supplies was neatly stacked on a rough plank table. Rifles and gun harness were in evidence.

It looked like an outlaw camp would look, Venable thought to himself—the abode of hunted men ready to hit the danger trail on a moment's warning.

Brad, the redhead, wore a red shirt to match his hair. The same costume detail seemed to apply to Cole, for he was dressed in a lemon-colored shirt.

Both deputies wore six-guns on their thighs—guns with stocks which were polished from much use. Venable found himself looking on the metal backstraps for the notches which he had heard that Western outlaws filed after each victim.

"Make yoreself tuh home, Bob!" invited Brad genially. "It ain't so elegant, but we—er—that is, this is sort of temporary quarters fer us Triggers. We live in Coyoteville, the county seat, but we're in this canyon on a—on a huntin' expedition."

Bob lost some of his nervousness before such frank hospitality and proceeded to take off his coat and vest. A wash in icy mountain water removed the alkali dust and sweat from his face and arms, after which he toweled with a clean gunny sack and felt much refreshed.

He went back outdoors to find Andy Trigger busy rubbing down the powerful sorrel mustang that had been the means of saving their lives. The steaming saddle and blanket lay to one side. Night had fallen in the Rio Placido gorge.

"May I ask a question of you men, please?" said the tenderfoot courteously, in the tone of one who has decided to plunge into cold water. "It's only fair to tell you what's on my mind."

"Shoot!" Andy grinned, pausing his curry-combing to roll a quirly.

"The stage driver said that you men were—ah—outlaws," stated Venable, drawing a deep breath. "But, although I am a stranger here in the West, as you can see"—he glanced at his city clothing apologetically—"I believe character is the same in any locality, Vermont or

Arizona. You gentlemen impress me as being—well, just that. Gentlemen! Are you?"

The three Texas Triggers looked at each other in the twlight, real emotion soberin their faces.

"That's right kind of yuh tuh think that, Venable, an' we appreciate it," spoke Andy softly. "Here in the West, we plumb admires hombres that is frank an' outspoken—not a bush-beater."

"Yore friend the stage driver was exaggeratin' a bit, but he's part right," admitted Cole. "That is, thar is plenty o' folks here in Sundown County that figgers us as long-loopin' skunks. That's why we're livin' here in the Rio Placido canyon."

"We'll tell our story, and you can draw yore own conclusions," put in Brad Trigger. "Me an' Cole come out hyar from Texas tuh help Andy clean out Sundown County's crooked element, after Andy got hisself elected sheriff, a month back. The crooks framed a robbery an' murder on Cole an' me, an' have posted a standin' offer o' five thousand dollars reward fer us—dead. So that makes us outlaws on our own range, in one sense o' the word."

Speaking with utter sincerity, the three Trigger brothers briefly outlined their story. It was a tale of injustice and persecution, and although they minimized their own exploits, Venable could see that they were slowly but surely cleaning up Sundown County, winning their one-sided fight to make it a place in which decent men could live.

"That's about all, I calc'late," said the sheriff in conclusion. "D'yuh reckon we'll do tuh ride the river with, Venable?"

Bob Venable grinned in the growing darkness, and extended his hand to each of the three Texans in turn.

"I believe you a hundred per cent," he assured them. "As for my own story, it is easily told. I am the nephew of old Brandin'-iron Venable, who owned the Wagonwheel Ranch near Coyoteville. Six weeks ago, my uncle was—er—died. I have come out to take charge of the ranch, being the only heir to his property."

Andy Trigger nodded.

"Yore uncle died afore I become sheriff, but there are plenty folks who think Brandin'-iron Venable was murdered, instead o' gittin' trampled tuh death in a beef stampede," commented the sheriff. "That's one o' the mysteries I intend cleanin' up, afore I turn in my badge."

The tenderfoot got back to his story after a brief silence.

"I was arriving on the stagecoach to-night, when it was held up by those three men. They seemed to know my name and who I was, which surprised me. Furthermore, although I was too dazed to recall clearly, I believe they didn't disturb the mail or freight. Their idea seemed to be to dump me in the stage, and then wreck it."

The sheriff puffed on his quirly and pondered.

"That stick-up has all the earmarks o' some one tryin' tuh keep you from reachin' your Wagonwheel Ranch," agreed the sheriff thoughtfully. "Did you see any identifyin' marks on the men?"

Venable's description of the masked trio would fit any of dozens of hombres in Arizona.

"But the one who shot Mr. Wickberg had a blind left eye," recalled the Vermont youth. "At least, it looked milky behind the eyehole in his mask."

Andy Trigger jerked erect. His eyes showed admiration for Bob

Venable's powers of observation. He might be a rank tenderfoot, but he had kept his eyes open in a moment of desperate emergency when most people, Westerners or not, would have lost their heads with fright.

"A blind left eye, huh?" cried the sheriff excitedly. "That'll be Prod Sleeven, boys. He's a member o' the Coyoteville Vigilante Committee that's swore tuh salivate us Texas Triggers on sight. But more important than that, Sleeven is the foreman o' yore uncle's Wagonwheel outfit, Venable!"

"I wrote Mr. Sleeven I was coming," asserted Venable. "In fact—— Of course! Mr. Sleeven told me what stagecoach to take!"

Brad and Cole looked at each other and fingered their guns.

"Aha!" whispered Cole. "The puzzle is done fitted together!"

Andy Trigger hitched up his gun belts and glanced at the sky, which was dotted with stars. His face was stern.

"Put some grub in yore bellies, pards," ordered the sheriff briskly. "While yo're doin' that, I'm goin' down tuh the river an' git Queen an' Jack. We're goin' tuh do a little night ridin'. An' I got a hunch we'll go a long way toward solvin' the mystery o' Brandin'-iron Venable's death."

Brad and Cole headed into the cabin, with Bob Venable between them. Andy Trigger picked up a lariat and headed toward the river bank, where his brothers' horses were grazing.

"Bob Venable is made o' the real stuff," commented the sheriff mentally. "He'll make a top hand when the green Vermont atmosphere wears off. An' I'm goin' tuh see that Prod Sleeven doesn't steal the Wagonwheel away from him!"

He reached the river's edge and headed up the bank toward the spot where he could dimly make out Queen and Jack. He was glad the horses were fresh, for they might have to ride fast and far that night.

Skirting a willow brake, Andy broke out the coil of rope, intending to fashion a loop on both ends to lead the pair of horses back to the cabin for saddling.

With both hands thus occupied, Andy Trigger heard a twig snap in the willows beside him. An instant later, he felt the round, cold nose of a six-gun rammed against the back of his neck.

"Move or yell, an' I'll drill yuh!" whispered a savage voice. "Yore jig is up, John Law!"

A hand clawed the blue-butted Colts from Andy's holsters as he stood motionless. The odor of whisky and tobacco reached his nostrils as two other hombres stepped forth from the thicket.

Then the lariat was jerked from his hands by one of the men, and the sheriff felt his wrists being jerked together and tied securely with his own lariat.

A slow, numbing dread chilled his heart as he realized he had fallen into the clutches of the three crooks who had attempted to murder Bob Venable.

CHAPTER IV.

SHOTS IN THE NIGHT.

A FULL moon tore free of a cloud trap above the canyon and exposed the leering features of the boss outlaw. Sheriff Trigger's lips tightened as he recognized the one-eyed foreman of the Wagonwheel Ranch, "Prod" Sleeven.

He had met the beefy-shouldered cowman at the spring round-up when he had been riding for the big Diamond Y outfit. No one on the

Sundown range liked Sleeven, but he had been made foreman of the Wagonwheel because he had once saved old "Brandin'-iron" Venable's life during a saloon brawl in Coyoteville.

"I figgered it'd be you, Sleeven," grated the sheriff. "Yore game is tuh git the Wagonwheel fer yore own spread, huh? Which confirms my hunch that Brandin'-iron didn't die in a herd stampede, like you claimed he did."

Sleeven exposed broken fangs in a leer of triumph.

"Yuh won't be alive tuh tell a jury anything, so I'll confess that much!" sneered the Wagonwheel foreman. "Yep, I killed Venable, sheriff. He caught me rustlin' some o' his stock an' got nasty. So I shot 'im, an' the boys run a herd over his carcass!"

One of Sleeven's henchmen, whom the moon revealed as Injun Jack, growled throatily.

"You heap foolish for tell um sheriff so much. Mebbe you sorry some time."

Prod Sleeven finished the job of tying the sheriff's wrists. The ropes cut through the flesh, making Andy wince with pain. Sleeven snorted his contempt at Injun Jack.

"Don't be loco, redskin. This jasper is goin' whar even his body won't be found. An' while his brothers are out huntin' for him, I'm sendin' you back tuh this cabin tuh lasso that Venable jasper. With him out of my way, I'll own the Wagonwheel."

Sleeven prodded Andy Trigger in the side with a gun barrel, turning him around to face the river. The sheriff's skin prickled as he glanced over his shoulder at the light in his cabin, not two hundred yards away. If only Brad and Cole knew what was happening! Yet he could not yell and lure them into a gun trap.

"We got a canoe down thar on the mud bar," whispered Sleeven. "You made a mistake tippin' us off that you Triggers was holed up down hyar, sheriff. My gang has a hideout fer rustled stock down the river. It was plumb easy tuh git up hyar."

Andy was prodded toward the Rio Placido, flanked by Injun Jack and the unkempt "Bow-legs."

A big dugout canoe was pulled up on a mud bank and made fast to a yellow boulder. Frogs trilled in the near-by cottowood scrub; the dampish odor of the marshland filled the air.

"Slide the canoe out, Bow-laigs," ordered Sleeven.

Leaning up against the yellow boulder while Sleeven bossed the launching of the big canoe, Andy thought rapidly. He pried a .45 cartridge from his gun belt with one thumb, and rubbed the lead tip against the stone, moving with speed in spite of his bound hands.

When he had finished, he backed up against the stone to hide what he had written there. A moment later, he was being shoved into the canoe, which had been made from a cedar log. It was charred on the inside and looked mossy and waterlogged outside.

Bow-legs stationed himself in the front of the canoe, while Injun Jack knelt in the stern with a stubby paddle. Andy Trigger took his place in the middle of the craft, with Prod Sleeven immediately behind him with six-gun ready.

With firm strokes, Injun Jack and Bow-legs sent the dugout into the sluggish stream, and commenced paddling with the current in the direction of the dynamited bridge through which the Coyoteville

stagecoach and team had plunged that afternoon.

"Now we're ready tuh let them other Triggers start prowlin'," chuckled Prod Sleeven, aiming his six-gun skyward.

Brrrang! Bang! Bang! The black cliffs of the gorge hurled back the jarring reports of three fast-triggered shots.

The night breeze whipped white smoke from the Colt as Sleeven swung it to cover Andy Trigger's back again.

"My scheme will work," boasted Prod. "Yore brothers will hear them shots an' figger yuh've been kidnaped when they cain't find yuh. They won't dream thar's a canoe on this river, so they'll high-tail it up the trail lookin' fer tracks."

Sheriff Andy Trigger groaned silently. There was every chance that Brad and Cole would behave exactly as Sleeven predicted, and ride up the only trail from their hide-out, hoping to overtake their brother's captors in the desert.

"That'll leave the tenderfoot behind in the cabin," chuckled Prod Sleeven, as the canoe floated rapidly around a bend in the canyon and the lights of the Trigger cabin passed from sight. "I'll send Injun Jack by hossback tuh force Venable tuh sign over a deed tuh the Wagonwheel. Then he'll git salivated an' buried. I'll tell the county recorder that he sold me the Wagonwheel ranch an' beat it back tuh Vermont."

As silent as ghosts, the canoe and its four passengers slid on down the canyon. Soon the skeleton framework of the Coyoteville bridge was overhead.

Washed like driftwood against the sandbars on either side rested the wreckage of the stagecoach. The carcasses of the six horses, tangled in the harness, were being devoured by coyotes on a near-by bar.

The canoe moved on into inky blackness where the moonlight was shut off by overhanging cliffs, past Grandpa Wickberg's floating corpse, skirting brushy banks.

"Better be sayin' yore prayers, sheriff!" advised Prod Sleeven, in a taunting voice. "Thar's a reward fer yore scalp, but I prefers tuh fix it so that not even yore corpse will ever be seen ag'in."

Andy Trigger half rose in the canoe, determined to take his chances of diving into the water and swimming off through the night, even if his hands were tied.

But Prod Sleeven guessed his intentions, and moved to prevent it. *Thud!* A six-gun barrel crashed against Andy's skull, and the sheriff sagged forward in the dugout.

CHAPTER V.

VENABLE'S DISCOVERY.

BRAD and Cole Trigger were cooking a meal of beans, sowbelly, coffee, and sour-dough biscuits when Prod Sleeven's three gunshots blasted the night stillness.

Before the tenderfoot knew what was happening, his two hosts had snapped six-guns from holsters and blown out the lamp. It gave Bob Venable his first experience of the fierce swiftness with which hunted men could think and act.

"A distress signal, an' it must 'a' come from Andy!" snapped Cole in the darkness of the cabin. "Let's go, Brad!"

The two Trigger brothers leaped out the door and headed at a run across the moonlit pasture, guns ready, eyes probing the darkness.

"Couldn't have been them three bandits," growled Brad, "or we'd 'a' heard their hosses comin' down the

ledge trail. Mebbe Queen or Jack kicked him accidental, and he fired them shots fer us tuh come an' help him."

Cole made no comment, but he did not believe Brad's simple explanation for the three shots any more than did Brad himself. Danger was riding the night—they could feel it with the unerring instinct of men who rub shoulders with death by night and day, the year around.

A minute later, they were weaving slowly through the meadow grass, with their two cayuses, Queen and Jack, whickering to them in the moonlight. Both horses made nervous trumpeting noises with their nostrils—a sure sign that something was wrong.

"Andy! Andy!" called Brad softly. "Where are yuh?"

No reply came to them. Bullfrogs trilled in the marsh grass. An owl hooted eerily as it winged across the starry sky.

"Hosses is still picketed," whispered Cole. "That means Andy didn't reach 'em."

They made their way to the willows which lined the river bank, searching for footprints. But the smooth rocks and gravel had left no sign of Andy's passage.

The moon cruised out from behind a cloud nest, flooding the canyon with ghostly light. It gave the deputies a clear view to the very foot of the ledge trail, which was the only possible route by which enemies could enter their domain on horseback. No one was in sight.

Risking a bullet from some ambushed killer, Brad Trigger called at the top of his lungs:

"Andy! Fire another shot tuh let us know whar yuh are!"

The sentence was repeated by the echoing cliffs. The night had swallowed up Andy Trigger just as the moon was buried in a bank of cloud.

They heard footsteps slogging through the pasture and whirled to cover the approaching figure. Then they relaxed as they recognized the tenderfoot. Both had momentarily forgotten that Bob Venable existed.

"What's wrong?" the pilgrim whispered anxiously.

Brad and Cole scanned the river bank, fear chilling their veins.

"Andy's missin'," muttered the blond lawman. "Jest them three shots—then nothin'. He couldn't be acrost the river, for the water laps the cliffs. He couldn't have gone upstream, because the river cuts into the cliffs thar. The only way out o' hyar is that ledge trail Andy brung you down, tuh-night."

Worry creased the boyish face of the Easterner.

"I'm the cause of all this," he murmured guiltily. "If the sheriff hadn't seen the runaway stagecoach and rescued me, nothing would have happened like this. It must have been Prod Sleeven and his two men, sneaking down here after us to murder Andy."

The three men set about through the grass, recoiling each time they saw a shadow lying on the ground for fear it might be the lifeless body of the sheriff. But as a thorough examination of the river bank failed to produce any trace of Andy Trigger, fear gave way to a sickening sense of helplessness.

"He's in trouble, blast it, an' needs help!" groaned Brad, rumpling his red hair in despair. "Let's fork our broncs, Cole, an' fog up the ledge trail. Andy couldn't have jest vanished in thin air. He was kidnaped by them long-riders!"

Cole regarded the Rio Placido with troubled eyes.

"They might 'a' tossed Andy intuh the river after shootin' him."

There was a moment's silence at this possibility.

"Do you boys have a boat?" asked the tenderfoot. "The river would provide another way to get in or out of here, you know."

The deputy sheriffs shook their heads.

"Andy told us thar wa'n't nary a boat on the Rio Placido," they assured him. "Nope, them crooks prob'ly snuck down the ledge trail, shot Andy, an' he fell off in the water. Our job is tuh ride up the trail an' mebbe track them killers down."

Faces sick with grief, Brad and Cole hurried for their horses, pulling up picket pins. Bob Venable made his way down along the river bank, searching for possible splashes of crimson which might indicate where Andy had been murdered.

Then the tenderfoot's keen eyes saw gouged-out marks on an outjutting mud bar, together with many boot tracks. At the same instant, his eyes lit on the yellow boulder, bathed with moonglow.

Four lead-smeared words stood out in shiny relief against the stone:

CANOE DOWNSTREAM SLEEVEN ANDY.

"Hey, men! I've found a message from your brother!"

Brad and Cole, in the act of mounting their ponies and riding bareback to the cabin to saddle up, tumbled to the ground and ran eagerly to the water's edge, where Bob Venable was pointing to the message Andy Trigger had scribbled on the rock with a bullet tip.

"See—Prod Sleeven came up the river by canoe, somehow or other, and kidnaped Andy!" translated Venable with breathless excitement. "While they were launching the canoe from this mud bar—see the keel marks there?—Andy wrote this message. That shows he's alive and being taken downstream."

The Trigger brothers sighed in relief. They pounded their Eastern friend on the back with new respect.

"Mebbe you've saved Andy's life, Bob! Come on, Cole—we got tuh find a log tuh float downriver on! It may be a trap, but——"

Moving with feverish haste, the three men ran upstream to where a twisted log had floated against the bank in the spring freshets. The log was embedded in the sand, but by employing the two horses to pull with their picket ropes, the log was floated.

"I wish I could help," suggested Bob Venable hopefully. "I've used a rifle some, and if you had an extra gun——"

The two Trigger boys were already astraddle the log, using broken poles to shove their improvised boat out into deep water.

"This log wouldn't float the three of us!" yelled Brad. "Stick around the cabin. Don't try tuh ride off on any o' the hosses, fer they're one-man broncs an' would throw yuh. We'll be back by mornin'—with Andy!"

The current caught the log and sent it swirling away from the bank. Soon Venable and the two horses were lost to view in the night, as the log floated around a bend in the canyon.

Lying astraddle the driftwood, Brad and Cole kept hands on gun butts, their eyes raking the dark chasm of the river before them. At any turn they might meet a hail of outlaw bullets.

An hour dragged by with nerve-sapping slowness, as the log floated steadily through the night. They passed the dynamited wreckage of the bridge, the coyote feast, and the

mangled corpse of Grandpa Wickberg, bobing in a shallow eddy.

The gorge narrowed, speeding up the current. The log raced breathlessly through a chute of rapids before the river spread out again in a moonshiny platter of water rimmed by high cliffs.

Brad, who was riding in front, was the first to spot the winking spark of light on the left shore. He twisted to signal Cole, just as the blond-headed cow-puncher sighted the fire also.

"Looks like an outlaw camp tuh me," husked Brad. "Let's try paddlin' with our hands an' gittin' this log tuh the bank. We kin sneak the rest o' the way on foot. An' be shore yore shootin' irons is primed. I got a hunch we're headin' fer trouble!"

The red light on the river bank grew larger as the lawmen sent their makeshift canoe toward shore. Soon it landed soddenly in a bank of weeks, and Brad and Cole waded ashore.

They paused a moment to inspect the cylinders of their .45s. Then they set off silently through the trees, every nerve tingling, eyes probing the darkness.

CHAPTER VI.

SLEEVEN'S CAMP.

SHERIFF ANDY TRIGGER was sure that he was doomed when the big dugout canoe rammed its blunt prow into the mud bank on which blazed a big camp fire.

Voices challenged the landing party, and the dark outlines of sombreroed and chap-clad men wagged across the rimming trees.

"The biggest rustlers' hide-out in Arizona, sheriff!" jeered Prod Sleeven, as he and Injun Jack helped drag Andy ashore. "But you won't live tuh put the clamps on it. More stolen beef is hazed through hyar in a year than is on the hull Wagonwheel range."

Andy Trigger gasped. One of the main reasons he had been elected sheriff of Sundown County by the cattlemen was to try to discover how thousands of dollars' worth of beef was being stolen yearly. Here was the answer—a rustling ring bossed by Prod Sleeven. But it was too late now to do anything about it.

"Waal, we dabbed our loop on the ringiest critter in Sundown County!" boomed Sleeven, as they climbed a shale bank and entered the circle of firelight. "Boys, meet the sheriff—in his last hour alive."

Andy Trigger, eyes squinted against the dancing fire, recognized several of the half dozen hombres who came forward to meet them. All were tough-looking jaspers with low-hung guns.

"These boys is members o' the Wagonwheel crew," muttered the sheriff to himself. "That's what ol' Brandin'-iron Venable got fer makin' Prod Sleeven his foreman. Sleeven fired the honest cowpokes an' replaced 'em with rustlers."

The traitorous Wagonwheel punchers moved in behind the procession, as Sheriff Trigger was led to the camp fire. Back against the cliff, Andy could see the black mouth of a cave which apparently served as outlaw headquarters for the gang.

"We got six more men, sleepin' inside the cave," explained Prod Sleeven. "All year round we hazes beef-stuff down here, fattens 'em up, an' takes 'em on rafts to a ford whar we kind load 'em on trains. An' now that I'll own the Wagonwheel range, it'll be simpler than ever."

Sheriff Andy Trigger's heart was drumming his ribs, but not a mus-

cle moved in his face to give any outside indication that he realized his danger.

"What's the idea o' bringin' the sheriff hyar?" grumbled one of the rustlers, throwing logs on the fire. "This hide-out has been kept secret from John Laws fer years now, an' thar's no use bringin' Trigger hyar, even if yuh are goin' tuh kill 'im."

Low mutters of approval told Prod Sleeven that his gang did not feel comfortable with even a hog-tied sheriff around.

"This is jest part of a bigger scheme o' mine," explained the boss rustler. "Yuh see, we kidnaped Andy tuh git his two brothers tuh leave their cabin upriver. Then I'm sendin' Injun Jack up thar tuh make Bob Venable talk business with us. Savvy?"

Grins of understanding began to light the faces of the crooked gang. After all, it was the tenderfoot from Vermont, the new owner of the Wagonwheel Ranch, whom the gang was after. If they could kill off the three Texas Triggers in the bargain, so much the better.

"Might as well git our scheme under way now," said Sleeven briskly. "Injun Jack, you saddle up a fast bronc an' ride tuh the cabin by our secret trail, savvy? Take this deed tuh the Wagonwheel along with yuh, an' if possible, make that Venable dude sign it afore yuh kill him. It'll make it that much easier tuh claim I own the mortgage. Hurry, an' keep an eye peeled fer them depities along the trail. If yuh kin dry-gulch 'em, I'll reward yuh plenty."

Injun Jack's beady eyes flashed. He trotted off in the darkness toward a picketed cavvy of saddle horses.

In a few moments, Andy Trigger heard the Navajo galloping off through the forest, bound for the Trigger cabin. If Brad and Cole had left the tenderfoot alone, it was his finish.

The sheriff's thoughts were interrupted by the approach of Prod Sleeven, who had left him guarded by Bow-legs. There was a vicious gleam in the outlaw's one good eye, as he planted his feet widespread in front of his prisoner. The flickering firelight made a devil's mask out of his narrow face.

"Mebbe yo're interested in knowin' what we're goin' tuh do tuh you," jeered the rustler chief. "We ain't goin' tuh give yuh a merciful bullet an' let yuh die quick—not by a jugful! You been braggin' how you an' your brothers was goin' tuh clean up Sundown County—now yuh'll eat them words!"

Andy Trigger's face twitched.

"You got me hog-tied, Sleeven, but don't fergit my two brothers is still on the loose. They'll carry on fer me—an' won't rest till they've shot every skunk in yore——"

Bam! Sleeven brought up a savage fist in an uppercut which connected solidly with the point of Andy's jaw. Caught off balance with his arms tied together, the Texan staggered backward and measured his length beside the camp fire.

He sat up, shaking his head dizzily to dispel the shower of stars which fogged his eyesight. In his ears was the coarse laughter of the Wagonwheel crooks.

"Now yuh'll listen tuh me without interruptin', mebbe!" snarled Sleeven viciously. "We're goin' tuh dump you intuh that ol' dugout canoe, tied hand an' foot. The boat will float down the river. An' only a quarter of a mile from hyar the Rio Placido goes into the Horado del Misterioso—an' that's whar you say adios!"

"The Horado del Misterioso!"

Andy Trigger went white as chalk with horror. Those words meant "Cavern of Mystery," and described the underground passage into which the Rio Placido vanished.

Like various other rivers in the Western part of America, the Rio Placido vanished under a mountain range. Where that underground river went, no man knew. Perhaps it wandered under the wild Redstone Mountains. At any rate, the Rio Placido was not seen again after it went inside the grim Horado del Misterioso.

"Don't like the prospects, huh?" jeered Prod Sleeven triumphantly. "Waal, yuh'll either starve or drown, or snakes will eat yore carcass. It's a cinch yuh'll never float out against that swift current. Yore body will never be seen ag'in, an' I won't have tuh worry about some U. S. marshal gittin' curious about whar Andy Trigger went, an' startin' an investigation!"

Crash! A six-gun exploded the night.

Out of the scrub forest which rimmed the camp fire winked an orange flash of fire.

Andy Trigger, sitting on the ground, twisted his head in the direction Prod Sleeven and his gang were staring spellbound.

As he did so, he was astounded to see two slim young hombres step out of the brush to cover the gang with four Colt six-guns.

"Stick 'em up, polecats!" came Cole Trigger's voice. "The first man who hesitates gits drilled!"

A few hands groped skyward as the surprised outlaws saw the deputies' six-guns weave over them. Matching stride like soldiers, Brad and Cole Trigger approached into the circle of firelight.

"You fellers shouldn't have risked this!" exclaimed Andy, his voice choked with pride. "They're nine against two, with some Mexicans sleepin' inside o' that cave yonder."

"Up with yore flippers, Sleeven!" bellowed Brad angrily, as he saw the boss outlaw's hands sliding toward the butts of his six-guns. "No monkey business, now! I'm honin' tuh shoot."

Suddenly Bow-legs thought he saw a chance to catch the deputies off guard and went for his guns. They came up blazing, but Cole's fast-swung guns blazed, and Bow-legs collapsed, the top of his skull blown off.

Things happened too fast for Andy Trigger to witness, then.

The five outlaws squatting across the camp fire went for their guns. The night suddenly exploded with crashing shots.

Prod Sleeven whirled in his tracks and sprinted toward the river bank, flinging bullets over his shoulder as he raced. Brad and Cole had leaped apart to present a smaller target, and were pounding lead through the flames.

A man screamed in agony as Brad's slug smashed his elbow. Three outlaws, leaping from behind the fire and racing toward the grim-faced pair of deputies with their guns flaming, saw that Cole was busy trying to gun down the fleeing Prod Sleeven and decided to rush Brad in a mob and riddle him with bullets.

And Sheriff Andy Trigger saw Brad respond with the most dazzling gun play the sheriff had ever witnessed.

Bang! Brad's left-hand .45 bucked and flamed.

Brraang! His right-hand weapon followed suit as the recoiling left gun lowered for the third shot.

One-two-three! Like dominos

knocking each other down, the three racing crooks plunged sidewise in the dirt, hearts drilled by Brad Trigger's .45s.

Out by the river bank, Prod Sleeven had managed to reach the brink. He spun to draw a deliberate aim with his long-barreled Colt on the stalking form of Cole Trigger.

Crang! The blond deputy sheriff fired from the hip, and Prod Sleeven staggered.

A gurgling scream came from his throat as he reached up his free hand to claw at his chest.

Then Sleeven toppled slowly backward, and his boot heels somersaulted over the shelving clay bank out of sight.

"Got 'im!" yelled Andy Trigger, who was lying on his stomach to keep out of range of the crisscrossing rain of lead.

Through banks of gun smoke, Brad and Cole leaped their way toward the fire, shooting through the camp fire at the two bandits still left uninjured.

The ground was strewn with wounded and dead men, victims of the brief quarter minute of battle when the Trigger brothers had sprayed the scene with slugs.

"Untie me, boys, an' let's high-tail it!" cried Andy Trigger, getting to his feet. "This shootin' has roused the Mexicans in the cave yander, an' they'll be foggin' us from inside!"

Cole Trigger had a knife out and was sawing Andy free of his bonds. He was not a moment too soon.

Awakened by the sound of firing, the Mexican rustlers inside the cave were now dashing out with drawn guns. Blinded by the firelight, the Texas Triggers realized they would be butchered if they did not flee while they had a chance.

"Quick—the canoe!" shouted Andy, sprinting toward the river bank. "They got a remuda grazin' somewhar, but we'd lose valuable time huntin' for it. We got tuh git upriver an' save Bob Venable afore that Navajo skunk gits thar!"

Shoulder to shoulder, the three Texans raced for the river bank. The camp fire blinded the gunmen who had run out of the cave, giving the fugitives an advantage.

The Triggers slid down the steep clay bank to the water's edge. A moment later, they were splashing knee-deep in the Rio Placido, shoving the dugout into the stream.

Andy and Brad leaped into the dugout and reached for paddles. Cole Trigger gave one final shove on the stern before scrambling aboard, and the dugout floated out into deep water.

"Them Mexicans won't spot us with the moon behind clouds!" cried the sheriff gleefully. "We'll make a get-away shore!"

And then a voice from the bow paralyzed them: "Oh, yeah? Well, guess again, skunks!"

The Texas Triggers stiffened with despair as they saw Prod Sleeven's crouching figure rising from the prow of the canoe, where he had taken refuge after pretending that Cole had shot him.

"Hands up, Triggers!" guffed the victorious outlaw chief. "Yuh danged near cleaned out my gang, but now it's my turn. Start paddlin' toward land—pronto!"

CHAPTER VII.

EMPTY GUN.

BOB VENABLE sat alone in the Trigger brothers' hide-out and brooded. He possessed a courageous spirit, despite the fact that he had been born and raised in a quiet Vermont farming community. His part in the present trouble disgusted him.

"I wonder what happened tuh Sheriff Andy," he mused, getting up to pace the floor nervously, "and his two brothers who promised to bring him back. Maybe it was just Prod Sleeven's ruse to get them in a trap. And it was all my fault."

His eye lighted on a holstered Colt .45 hanging from a nail on the door. Eagerly he removed it from leather and carried it over to the table lamp, inspecting it curiously.

It was the first time in his life that the tenderfoot had ever had a firearm other than a squirrel rifle in his hands. And now he found the weapon a heavier and larger object than he had supposed Western cowboys carried. To his surprise he found that the gun bore little resemblance to the .32 revolvers which New Englanders kept in their bedrooms to guard against burglars.

A Frontier model that was the favorite of Western cowboys, the gun in Venable's hand was built for heavy duty, yet it balanced perfectly in his palm.

Like many tenderfeet, he was surprised to note that its overall length was nearly fourteen inches, and it hefted nearly three pounds.

He thrust it into the waistband of his pants and went over to the stove to poke up the fire. As he did so, Venable heard footsteps crunching on the gravel outside, and his heart leaped joyfully.

"The Trigger boys are back!" he cried, leaping to the door and swinging it open. "Cole and Brad made good their—— *Hey!*"

The breath wheezed from the tenderfoot's lungs as a six-gun muzzle struck him in the pit of the stomach. In through the door stalked a leering, brown-faced, black-haired hombre. Beady, snakelike eyes blazed into Bob's with the ferocity of a diamond-back rattler about to strike.

"Stand back, heap quick!" snarled his unexpected visitor, shoving Venable backward across the room and kicking the door shut with a spurred boot. "We meet again, Señor Venable!"

The tenderfoot's face lost its healthy hue as Bob Venable realized that he was being confronted by one of the bandits who had held up the Coyoteville stage that afternoon.

"What—do you want?" panted Venable, his eyes staring at the round black bore of the crook's .45, leveled at his heart.

"Me Injun Jack," introduced the Navajo, leering wickedly. A crafty light kindled in the redskin's eyes as he pawed in his chaps pocket to draw out a folded sheet of paper. "You put um name on this paper, me go without hurt you."

Injun Jack made no attempt to frisk his dude prisoner for weapons, little dreaming that the Vermonter had a six-gun under his city coat. The coat, however, not only hid the Colt, but prevented it from being quickly drawn.

Taking the paper from the Indian's hand, the tenderfoot stared at the document in amazement. It was a deed to the Wagonwheel Ranch, written on a printed legal form for filing in the Sundown County recorder's office.

"Sign um on line, me go," repeated Injun Jack.

Thoughts churned inside Venable's head. He recognized this inked-in handwriting—it was that of his uncle's foreman, Prod Sleeven, who had written him instructions as to what stagecoach to take after getting off the train at Cactus Junction, the day before.

"Why, the dirty scoundrel!" gasped the tenderfoot, anger making him forget his danger. "Sleeven wants me to—to sign away the

Wagonwheel without payment—is that it?"

The Indian shrugged.

"Me no savvy. You sign um paper quick—me go quick."

But Injun Jack was not fooling Bob Venable. The tenderfoot knew that, the instant he signed the deed, the Navajo would deal out swift death before leaving the cabin. Cold sweat broke out in a film over the tenderfoot's face.

"All right, Injun Jack," agreed the Vermont newcomer, going around the table and sitting down. "If you promise you won't harm me, I'll sign this deed for Mr. Sleeven."

Injun Jack licked his lips like a fox about to slaughter a partridge. This tenderfoot was an easier mark than he had expected.

"Me promise no hurt um," lied Injun Jack. "You sign um."

The tenderfoot's pulses were hammering, but his hand was steady. He was surprised to find his thoughts crystal-clear as he came face to face with personal danger.

"Hand me that pencil there," sighed the tenderfoot, smoothing out the deed as if surrendering to the outlaw's demand.

Injun Jack's eyes dropped to the table to look for the pencil. As he did so, Bob Venable whipped back his coat, and his hand came up with a Frontier Colt .45.

Reaching out quickly, Venable brought the heavy barrel down across Injun Jack's knuckles, knocking the crook's six-gun to the floor. The Navajo batted his eyes with astonishment at finding himself disarmed. Then he leaped back like a cougar.

But Bob Venable had sprung out from behind the table, his face grim in the lamplight, cocking the heavy knurled prong of the big six-gun.

"Get your paws away from that knife!" snarled the tenderfoot, his heart thrilling as he saw the look of craven terror in the Indian's eyes. "I hold the high cards now, Injun Jack!"

But as Bob Venable drew closer, Indian Jack caught a detail which the tenderfoot, in his ignorance of six-guns, had overlooked. No lead snouts of bullets showed in the chambers of the gun cylinder. Venable was holding an empty gun!

Injun Jack's hands lifted high beside his cone-peaked black sombrero. His chest rose and fell in pretended terror.

The trick worked. It drew Bob Venable within arm's length, intending to snatch the bowie knife from the Indian's belt. The moment he touched the haft, Injun Jack would wrench the empty six-gun from Venable's grasp and dash out the tenderfoot's brains with the heavy weapon.

Not realizing his danger, Venable reached for the knife in the Indian's belt to disarm him. And then the Navajo pounced like an attacking tiger.

CHAPTER VIII.

UNDERGROUND RIVER.

THE Texas Triggers, sick with despair, climbed out of the dugout canoe once more, as Mexican outlaws slid down the clay bank and covered them with many guns.

"Tie 'em all up, *compadres!*" ordered Prod Sleeven, when Brad and Cole had been stripped of their guns. "We'll put all three of 'em in this dugout an' float 'em intuh that underground river!"

Sleeven swaggered arrogantly up and down the bank while his Mexican henchmen produced lariats and made certain that the three lawmen were trussed securely at hands and feet.

For the benefit of Brad and Cole, who were strangers to Arizona, Prod Sleeven went into the horrible details of what death would mean in the Horado del Misterioso—perhaps drifting for days through underground channels, helpless to steer the canoe, powerless to buck the current even if they were not hog-tied. Death might come in any of a dozen unthinkable forms.

Horror laid its icy hands on the hearts of the three brothers as they realized their helplessness. It was far worse than going to their deaths fighting with fists or knives or guns.

"I reckon my victory is complete," jeered Prod Sleeven. "I'll be gittin' rid o' three o' the saltiest lawmen that ever ramrodded Sundown County. I'll be gittin' the Wagonwheel fer my own, an' nobody will ever know that you fellers was murdered. Yuh simply disappeared!"

Brutal hands seized the three Texas Triggers and hurled them roughly into the dugout. Prod Sleeven's evil, one-eyed face hung over the gunwale as the rustlers gripped the canoe and shoved it off the bank.

"Adios, Trigger skunks!" taunted Prod Sleeven. "Have a happy voyage, as the sayin' goes! Afore yuh croaks in that underground river, jest remember that Prod Sleeven knowed he was more than a match fer three mavericks from the Panhandle!"

Brad and Cole snarled their defiance, but Andy Trigger was silent in his rage. His brain was working frantically, trying to figure some tiny chance of escape. But there was none. They were without weapons, and the heavy ropes which bound them hand and foot were impossible to untie.

Jeering like Apaches around a torture stake, the rustling gang shoved the dugout into deep water. Almost at once, the three Texas Triggers felt the current of the Rio Placido tug at the dugout, and it began to pick up speed.

Outside the shadow of the towering cliffs, the moonlight gilded the bottomlands and the surface of the river. As the helpless passengers in the canoe wriggled to sitting positions, they could see the flat bottomlands gliding past with ever-increasing speed.

"Guess we're done for, boys," panted Andy Trigger through set teeth. "Once the Rio Placido goes inside the mountain, it never comes out again."

A quarter mile downstream, the path of moonlight vanished against the box end of the canyon. The river glided like a great serpent into the arched mouth of a vast tunnel —the dreaded Horado del Misterioso.

"Whew!" breathed Cole Trigger, squaring his jaw. "This is a heck of a way to die. But let's go down game, like Texas Triggers!"

Back on the bank, outlined against the dying camp fire, could be seen Prod Sleeven and the remains of his gang, watching the canoe drifting steadily toward the tunnel.

And then Andy Trigger caught sight of a lone horseman galloping across the meadowland, a moving black ghost in the mnoolight.

"Hyar comes Injun Jack!" yowled Prod Sleeven's booming voice, echoing weirdly from cliff to cliff. "That means he's killed Venable an' mebbe got the deed! Even if he ain't, we're sittin' pretty on the Wagonwheel spread!"

Brad Trigger groaned, as they saw the distant horseman slow down to a trot. They could recognize Injun Jack's cone-shaped sombrero, and

the rangy pinto which he had ridden out of camp.

Suddenly Andy Trigger sat bolt upright against the gunwale of the drifting dugout. His falcon-sharp eyes detected the amateurish way in which the approaching horseman rode a trotting horse, with daylight showing under the saddle at each bounce.

"Hey! That—that ain't Injun Jack!" whispered the sheriff. "By the jumpin' juniper tree, pards, that's Bob Venable!"

Lifting his voice, Andy Trigger shouted loudly toward the trotting horseman who was approaching the outlaw camp:

"Hey, Venable! Thar's an outlaw camp down the trail yander. Turn around an' ride like blazes! They'll kill yuh!"

They saw the horseman rein his pinto toward the river, staring across the rippling water at the canoe. And then, without hesitation, the rider plunged Injun Jack's horse into the stream and began swimming toward the floating canoe.

"Go back! Go back, yuh fool!" screamed Cole Trigger. "You can't save us, an' them outlaws will git yuh!"

But Venable had different ideas. A tenderfoot, he was treading where experienced cowboys would have feared to tread.

Hugging the saddle horn, Bob Venable set the horse's head at an angle down the river, in a line designed to head off the drifting canoe's course.

And two minutes later, while Prod Sleeven and his dumfounded followers stared in amazement, they saw the hombre whom they thought was Injun Jack reach the canoe and grab the gunwale with one hand!

"Git yore hosses, men!" howled Prod Sleeven. "Somethin's gone wrong! That danged Injun must be loco, tryin' tuh save them Texas Triggers! But we kin stop that, soon enough!"

Bob Venable, clad in Injun Jack's sombrero, clambered over the edge of the canoe, maintaining a tight grip on the pinto's reins. The pony struck off toward the opposite bank of the river, towing the canoe alongside into the quiet eddies!

Grinning broadly, Bob Venable removed Injun Jack's knife from his pocket and proceeded to saw loose Andy Trigger's bonds. When the sheriff was free, he let Venable pay attention to holding the horse's reins, while he made short work of the rope-bound hands and feet of his deputy-sheriff brothers.

"Kid, yore danged-fool stunt has saved our lives!" congratulated Andy Trigger, his voice husky with gratitude. "What happened in that cabin, anyhow? Or did yuh meet Injun Jack on the trail headin' yore way?"

The canoe was reaching shallow water by the time Bob Venable had finished his modest explanation:

"And just as I reached for the knife in Injun Jack's belt, he pounced on me. I pulled trigger, but the gun was empty. He was trying to jerk it out of my hands, so I—well, I used to box a little in Vermont. I let Injun Jack have an uppercut on the chin, and he flopped back and broke his skull on the stove. He was dead, so I got the idea of borrowing his hat and horse and gun and trying to find the outlaw camp he came from."

The four men leaped out of the canoe as it reached the bank. Even as they did so, the air whined like swarming bees as the outlaw gang behind them opened fire.

Staring back across the river, Andy Trigger tensed with alarm.

The river was thick with swimming horses and riders. Prod Sleeven was leading his six Mexican crooks across the river in pursuit!

"They'll overtake us the minute they land, an' we ain't got guns!" gasped Andy Trigger.

Bob Venable reached in his coat pocket and produced two loaded .45 Colts—one being Injun Jack's. The other was the one he'd found in the cabin.

"Here, Andy—you can use these better than I can," said the Vermont tenderfoot. "What do you want me to do?"

The sheriff grabbed the guns, cocked them eagerly. A fighting glint was in his eye as he regarded the oncoming rustlers.

"Hide in the brush, pards!" ordered the sheriff. "Mebbe I kin hold these skunks off long enough fer you three tuh make yore git-away. No use all four of us gittin' killed!"

There was no time for arguing. Show-down time had come, and to linger in the moonlight might mean speedy death. Growling with disappointment, Brad and Cole went sprinting off down the river bank to seek shelter, with Bob Venable matching their stride.

Alone on the grassy river bank, Andy Trigger clutched the two guns and made his way to the side of the grounded dugout. It offered scant protection against the murderous guns of seven expert bullet slingers, but it was the one chance in a million to save the lives of his younger brothers and the tenderfoot.

Not fifty feet away, Prod Sleeven and his men were reaching shallow water. Once on dry land, they could easily surround their unarmed victims and gun them out of hiding.

"Halt where yuh are an' throw yore guns in the river!" yelled Andy Trigger, bracing himself for a show-down from which he did not expect to come out alive.

Yells of defiance went up as the outlaw gang spotted the lone hombre crouching by the canoe. A dozen guns flamed as one, and the air sizzled as Prod Sleeven's men opened fire.

Lead shivered the cedar dugout as Andy Trigger rested his six-gun barrels on the gunwale and triggered five times in grim, cool deliberation. He was staking his life on his marksmanship.

Four saddles emptied magically, Mexican crooks flopping off in crimson foam. The two remaining Mexicans yelled hoarsely in terror and wheeled their horses to head across the river in retreat. But Prod Sleeven spurred forward through foot-deep water, twin guns in hand as he rode up for show-down.

Out into the open leaped Andy Trigger, opening his mouth to order the rustler chief to surrender. But Prod Sleeven's guns were bellowing.

Brang! The sheriff's slugs streaked toward a common target from the hot barrels of his guns, and drilled through the milky blind eye in the Wagonwheel foreman's skull.

With a choked cry, Prod Sleeven wabbled in the saddle. His panic-stricken horse bucked, and the outlaw's body catapulted through space to land with a splash at Andy's feet.

"I've avenged Brandin'-iron Venable an' Grandpa Wickberg—an' accomplished the main job I undertook as sheriff," panted Andy, as he stooped to reclaim his own blue-butted six-guns which Sleeven had chosen for his own. "I reckon the Sundown County cattle rustlin' is over at last."

Brad and Cole, with Bob Venable

between them, emerged from the brush where they had witnessed the sheriff's grim stand against overwhelming odds, to meet Andy Trigger as he strode, tired but grinning, up the bank.

"That—that was wonderful!" panted the tenderfoot, as he pumped the young Texan's arm. "You faced those odds to save us, knowing you'd probably be shot down."

Andy Trigger gripped Venable's shoulders and shook his head slowly.

"Yo're the hombre who made it possible tuh clean out this rustlin' gang tuh-night, Venable," whispered the sheriff earnestly. "Believe me, yo're one Eastern tenderfoot who's proved he's got the brains an' the bravery tuh operate a Western cow outfit agin' any odds. An' ter-morrow you'll step intuh yore new job as boss o' the Wagonwheel Ranch. The Texas Triggers wish yuh luck!"

But the Triggers themselves ain't in the clear yet. A lot o' folks still figure they're outlaws and crooks. So watch fer what happens to 'em in their next story, which same will be in next week's issue o' Street & Smith's Wild West Weekly.

A FIGHT WITH A PANTHER

A YOUNG man named Riley, whose family had settled near the South Sulphur River, went out one day to hunt for beaver. He seated himself on a bluff above the bank of the Sulphur, and, with his gun across his knees and his feet hanging over the bluff, he waited patiently to see the beaver coming up to sport in the deep water above the dam.

He waited and watched until the sun went down, but the beaver did not show up. It was getting dusk, and Riley was thinking of returning home, when a large panther crept up silently behind him and, with a sudden bound, leaped upon his shoulders, burying its teeth in the back of his neck and fastening its claws in his body under the arms. The impact caused Riley to lose his balance, and both he and the panther went over the bluff, striking the bank of the stream ten feet below.

They were still clinched, and the furious animal showed no sign of loosening its hold.

Riley's gun was broken off at the breech, and was useless, but he grasped his knife from his belt and cut himself loose by thrusting it several times up to the hilt behind the shoulder of his enemy. He then crawled up the bank and the panther rolled into the water.

Riley was unable to stand. He went on his hands and knees toward his home, calling for help as he moved painfully along. His father, who was working in a field, finally heard him and went to his assistance.

After getting him to the house, a doctor was sent for, while the family gave him first aid. He was ill a long time, but recovered, owing to the good care he received. The muscles of his neck, having been severely torn, caused him to have a stiff neck all his life.

The day after the battle, his brothers went to the place where Riley had been watching for the beaver, and found the panther's den. In it were two tiny young ones. They were taken home, and were raised as pets. They became quite tame and used to follow the children around, and play with them like frisky kittens.

Fiddlin' Joe's Song Corral

This department is maintained in an effort to preserve old cowboy songs and frontier ballads.

If you want to find the words to some Western song, write and tell us about it. We'll do our best to find it for you and publish it in the magazine. If you know any old songs, send them to us for publication, giving as much of their history as you can.

We do not send copies of songs to individual readers, but we will tell you in what issue of Wild West Weekly you can find the one you want.

Address all letters to Fiddlin' Joe, care of Street & Smith's Wild West Weekly, 79 Seventh Avenue, New York, N. Y.

HOPE yo're celebratin' Thanksgivin' time with real feelin's of joy, folks! Seems to me we, in this hyar country especially, have a lot to be thankful for. The United States has such a plentiful supply of nature's riches an' man's productions thet it's bound to come out all right, sooner or later. So we kin be thankful thet we're livin' in a time an' in a country thet will realize tremendous progress for everybody.

But while yo're thinkin' of progress of the nation, don't forgit progress of our Corral Clubs! They're important, too. If we ever could develop enough of 'em tuh really establish a chain of 'em across the country, communicatin' with one another an' collectin' songs all along the line, we'd be doin' something worth while, folks. Don't forgit that!

Now for tuh-day here's a song by S. Omar Barker, who sure kin write 'em. This one's called:

A TRAIL HERD LULLABY*

By S. Omar Barker

(An Old-time Cowgirl Sings Her Little Grandson to Sleep)

'Twas in the spring of Eighty-two,
The Texas herds come drivin' through,
Longhorns strung out across the plain—
We'll never see such sights again!
Go to sleep—ooee-oo-ee-ooh!

We'd hear 'em bawl fer miles around,
Their trompin' seemed to shake the ground.
Behind 'em cowboys cussed an' sweat—
My dim old eyes can see 'em yet!
Sleep an' dream my-ee-baby-ooh!

* Reprinted by kind permission of the author from his book called "Buckaroo Ballads," published by the Santa Fe New Mexican Publishing Corporation.

They camped some nights not far away,
We'd hear 'em singin' plumb till the day,
A lonesome tune without no words—
A night-herd song to calm the herds:
Oo-ee-oo—ooee—oo-ee-ooh!

As they rode past our pore dugout
They'd wave at me with a friendly shout,
And I'd wave back and give them smiles
To cheer them over lonely miles.
Granny lo-oves her-er baby-ooh!

Some of them short, some of them tall,
But only one out-smiled them all!
Like early sunlight on the hills,
His laughin' eyes filled me with thrills!
Sleep, black-haired babe—ooee-oo-ee-ooh!

Oh, he was bold and brave and slim,
And true to me, as I to him;
And in the fall when herds came south,
He brought warm kisses for my mouth!
Dreams were sweet—back in Eighty-two-ooh!

'Twas in the spring of Eighty-three
That he rode back and married me.
Behind the herd we rode away—
Now his black hair is silver-gray!
Sleep an' dream—ooee-oo-ee-ooh!

I still can hear the tromp of steers
In time-sweet echoes through the years,
And with the herds of Eighty-two
Your granddad a-singin': "Oo-ee-ooh!"
Ooo-ee-oo—ooee—ee-ooh!

Somebody was askin' fer trail-herd lullabies recently. They oughter be glad to see this one.

Hyar's a request thet's come in recently from Mary and Blanche Nunvar, of Minnesota. They ask fer the words to "His Trademarks" and "The Crazy Song" and say: "If you know these would you please publish the words for us soon in the W. W. W.? We'll be on the lookout for 'em. Thanks heaps and we shore hope that you know these songs because we're powerful anxious to get 'em."

So help 'em out, folks.

An' here's one more song, afore we part fer this week:

WARING OF SONORATOWN

By Henry Herbert Knibbs

The heat acrost the desert was a-swimmin' in the sun
When Waring of Sonoratown,
Jim Waring of Sonoratown,
From Salvador come ridin' down, a-rollin' of his gun.

He was singin' low and easy to his pony's steady feet,
But his eye was live and driftin'
Round the scenery and siftin'
All the crawling shadows shiftin' in the tremblin' gray mesquite.

Eyes was watchin' from a holler where an outlaw chola lay;
Two black, snaky eyes a-yearnin'
For Jim's hoss to make the turnin',
Then—to loose a bullet burnin' through his back—the chola way.

And Jim Waring's gaze, a-rovin' free and easy as he rode,
Settled quick—without him seemin'
To get wise and quit his dreamin'
On a shiny ring a-gleamin' where no ring had ever growed.

But the lightnin' don't give warnin'—just a lick and she is through.
Waring set his gun to smokin'
Playfullike—like he was jokin',
And a chola lay a-chokin', and a buzzard cut the blue.

So long, folks—an' good luck!

The Wranglers Corner

All letters intended for The Wranglers Corner should be addressed to The Range Boss, Street & Smith's Wild West Weekly, 79 Seventh Avenue, New York, N. Y.

THE four saddle pards from Circle J are the first waddies ter git here fer this week's meetin' o' the 3W spread. An' fer once, Buck Foster an' Joe Scott ain't arguin'. We don't know what's the matter with 'em, at first, but then we realizes thet they're jest too plumb full o' turkey, after their Thanksgivin' feast, ter talk.

O' course, Sing Lo, like most good cooks, ain't had as much of his own grub as the others. So he ain't quite so sleepy an' groggy as his pards. A big grin splits his round yaller face, an' we got a hunch thet he's thinkin' up some kind o' mischief.

Pretty soon, Shorty Masters, M. D.—the same meanin' Mule Driver—an' his lean cowboy pard, Willie Wetherbee, better known as the Sonora Kid, come traipsin' in. An' they ain't hardly got set down, after greetin' the Circle J bunch, when in comes Sonny Tabor—the badly "wanted" young outlaw from Arizona.

Dogie Cantwell an' Tex Mellen, his foreman, are the next ter arrive, an' they makes the meetin' complete.

Thinkin' thet it'll mebbe wake 'em up a bit ter do some readin', we opens the mail sack an' dumps out the letters, handin' one ter Billy West.

"O. K., Billy," we says. "Let's hear yuh read this here one."

Billy sighs an' gives us a sour look. But he finally reads as follers:

BUENAS NOCHES, Boss! Your magazine is one of the best books going. I have been reading it since "Billy West On Buzzard Flats" was published, 'way back in October, 1927.

Buck Foster ought to blow Joe Scott in half wth a scattergun loaded with buckshot. Buck is a real veteran of the West, despite other reading hombres' decisions about him.

When I come to your country, I'll drop into the Wranglers Corner and pick out a few of my favorites, such as Kid Wolf, Sonny Tabor, Silver Jack Steele, the Bar U twins, Johnny Forty-five, and the Silver Kid to come and ride for me. I'll pick Buck Foster as my ramrod.

Well, Boss, I guess I've got to let my pen run dry, as it will soon be my turn to ride herd. Yours till all the punchers get together and drive all the bad men, rustlers, and outlaws out of the States. THE YUCCA KID.

Australia.

"By heifers," exclaims Buck Foster, "thet Yucca Kid am a plumb smart hombre! I'd shore admire ter ramrod his spread for 'im. But where am it located at? Kin I ride thar?"

"I wish yuh'd try it, boxhead!" speaks up Joe Scott. "I wish yuh'd ride yore bronc plumb inter the ocean an' drowned yoreself."

Buck snorts, but afore one o' their famous arguments an' wranglin' sprees kin git under way, we pulls out another letter an' hands it ter Buck.

"Yore turn next, Buck," we says, winkin' at the rest o' the gang. "Or have yuh went an' left yore specs home ag'in ternight?"

"I'll be a horned toad, if thet ain't jest what I've done," says Buck, tryin' ter look like he means it. "I'd plumb admire ter read thet letter fer yuh, but I can't do it without me specs an'——"

"Heah be specs, Mistlee Flosta," speaks up Sing Lo. "China boy allee same findee in bunk house an' bling along. Heah! You takee an' allee same lead lettah."

An' the chink hands Buck a pair o' steel-rimmed specs!

Buck is so durned flabbergasted thet he takes the specs an' jest sets thar lookin' at Sing Lo. He can't think of a thing ter say. The rest o' the gang whoops with laughter, realizin' thet Buck's bluff has been called. The ol' coot can't read, nohow—glasses or no glasses.

"Waal, help me, Hannah!" he finally exclaims. "Whar did yuh git them specs, heathen? They ain't mine. I'll be a horned toad, if I'll wear 'em. They'll ruin me peepers."

"Haw-haw-haw!" roars Joe Scott. "Yuh couldn't read thet letter even with a telescope, mosshorn! An' even if yuh knowed how ter read, yore so durned old an' blind yuh couldn't see it a-tall."

Buck is fit ter be tied, at thet. He sputters an' roars like a bee-stung grizzly. But we figgers we're wastin' time. So we gives the next one ter Joe Scott. Here's what the redhead reads:

DEAR BOSS: Here I am, slingin' some ink at the Corner. I hope I hit it plumb center.

I am going to tell you right now that your stories sure are swell entertainment. They are always good and clean.

The short story, "Traitors on the Two Bar," with young Spec as the hero, sure was good. I would like to read more stories about him.

I always enjoy the Circle J novelettes. Kid Wolf and Pete Prentiss—the Whistlin' Kd—are fine, too.

Say, what has happened to the Bar U twins? If you don't bring them back soon, I'm going to be plumb sad.

Well, I've been readin' W. W. W. for seven or eight years, and I hope it stays as good as it is. So long and good luck to you and all the waddies. TOM LITTLE.

Broken Arrow, Oklahoma.

We gives the next letter ter Sonny Tabor. Here it is:

DEAR RANGE BOSS: I have been reading 3W for the past five years. The longer I read it, the better I like it. I never miss reading the Wranglers Corner, but this is the first time I've had enough nerve to write to you.

I think one of the best stories I have ever read about Solo Strant was "The Silver Kid's Gun Song."

I greatly admire all your waddies, but of course, I have my favorites. They are Silver Jack Steele, Señor Red Mask, Kid Wolf, the Silver Kid, and the Oklahoma Kid.

As far as I am concerned, you can string up Ed Sparks any time you get ready.

The best story you have ever published was "Kid Wolf Rounds Up Sonny Tabor."

What has happened to Silver Jack Steele? Long time no see.

Yours till Jack Reese goes back to Oklahoma. EDWARD VAUGHN.

Dayton, Ohio.

As Sonny lays the letter down, we picks it up an' looks over thet list o' favorites. Shore enough, jest like suspected, Sonny left his own name out when he read it. As a matter o' fact, the name o' Sonny Tabor headed Elwood Vaughn's list.

"Yuh shouldn't be so durned bashful, Sonny," we chuckles, an' hands the next letter ter Shorty Masters.

Here it is:

DEAR BOSS: Here are my favorite waddies and authors. If you arrange them right, you can see the name of my favorite magazine, too:

Kid Wolf
DogIe Cantwell
Sing Lo
Philip F. Deere

The Whistlin' Kid
Cleve Endicott
Ward M. Stevens
Walker Tompkins

Billy West
LeE Bond
Border Eagle
Risky McKee
Guy L. Maynard
TommY Rockford

Yours truly, CAB.

New York City.

O' course, Shorty has ter pass thet letter around, so all the gang kin see how it spells out the name o' the magazine, readin' down.

Thanks a lot, Cab. Thet makes a plumb interestin' an' unusual sort o' letter. Come ag'in, hombre!

The Sonora Kid reads the next:

DEAR RANGE BOSS: This is my first letter to your Corner, and I sure hope you print it. I have been reading 3W for about five years, and I think it is the best magazine sold. I have read every other magazine on the stands, but none is as good as W. W. W.

Keep the girls out of the stories. One or two, now and then, would be all right, but not many. There is too much love in the other magazines. That's the reason I like 3W best.

My favorites are Sonny Tabor, Kid Wolf, the Circle J pards, and Prairie Scout. I certainly liked the stories of the Whispering Rider, too. Please bring the Bar U twins around more often.

Yours till Buck Foster gets married.

ROSALIE.

West Virginia.

Dogie Cantwell reads the next, an' here it is:

DEAR BOSS: This is my first letter to the Corner. I have been reading W. W. W. for nigh onto three years, and I am twelve years old. I think 3W gets better every week.

The W. W. W. is sure a swell book, and Street & Smth's Sport Story Magazine is good, too, but not so good as 3W.

My favorites are Sonny Tabor, Kid Wolf, and Johnny Forty-five.

Some of the hombres laugh at me for reading it, but they are plumb loco.

Most of your readers are right—keep the gals out of the magazine.

Yours till the Oklahoma Kid gets handsome.

SONNY TABOR, II.

Sandersville, Georgia.

We chuckles. "Seems like thet readin' hombre is a little behind the times," we says. "He should have signed his letter 'Sonny Tabor, VIII,' or somethin'. There's been a hull flock o' Sonny—— Holy smokes! Look at the time! Blazes an' bald-faced hornets! It's time this here meetin' adjourned."

An' it is. But there'll be another one here at the Corner next week.

THE RANGE BOSS.

COMIN' NEXT WEEK!

DANGER DRUMS ON THE PONY MAIL

Novelette

By WARD M. STEVENS

When they start to roll, Freckles Malone an' his big pard, Swen, hit the trouble trail, with their guns loaded an' their powder dry.

PETE RICE HANDS IN HIS STAR

Novelette

By AUSTIN GRIDLEY

But neither Pete nor his two fightin' depities, Teeny and Misery, need their stars ter ride herd on a bunch o' rustlers an' killers.

TEXAS TRIGGERS AT MYSTERY MOUNTAIN

Novelette

By WALKER TOMPKINS

There's s'posed to be a ghost on Mystery Mountain, but the triggers ain't skeered o' spooks an' ha'nts. They ride in—and guns start poppin'.

Also stories of the Whistlin' Kid, by Emery Jackson; Billy the Kid, by Samuel H. Nickels; Dogie Cantwell—and other characters.

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After this experience with Vacu-matic, you can depend that on my future speed runs across country that I will be depending on Vacu-matic to give me the same added performance it has proven on this last record breaking drive.

Yours very truly,
Bob McKenzie

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SEEDOL Kelpamalt Tablets

● **Manufacturer's Note:—Inferior products, sold as kelp and malt preparations—in imitation of the genuine Seedol Kelpamalt are being offered as substitutes. The Kelpamalt Company will reward for information covering any case where an imitation product has been represented as the original Seedol Kelpamalt. Don't be fooled. Demand genuine Seedol Kelpamalt Tablets. They are easily assimilated, do not upset stomach nor injure teeth. Results guaranteed or money back.**

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